Palestine: Toward a Critical Theological Aesthetics

Author: Derek Brown

Palestine:
Toward a Critical Theological Aesthetics

Derek Brown

A thesis

submitted to the Faculty of

the department of theology

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Philosophy and Theology

Boston College
Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences
Graduate School

April 2016

Palestine:
Toward a Critical Theological Aesthetics

Derek Brown

Advisor: Brian Robinette, PhD

This project seeks to critique the occupation of Palestine with the categories and methods of a critical theological aesthetics. The theological aesthetics employed here is critical because it develops Theodor Adorno's aesthetic project: beauty is dialectical, historical, and, above all, negative. Beauty is negative as it is founded on renunciation: beauty renounces ugliness. Adorno's project is advanced through an encounter with Christ. Christ, as witnessed on the Cross, is the absolute fulfillment of negative beauty: Christ, who is absolutely personal, material, and relational, renounces renunciation itself. This fulfillment of negative beauty demands engagement and participation: to follow Christ is to do beauty; it is to renounce ugliness in a beautiful way. The occupation of Palestine, especially revealed through the phenomenon of suicide bombing, stands as an unsettling and dark ugliness. Because the occupation is funded and supported by so-called Christian Zionists, it is an occupation that challenges that character of God. Because occupation works aesthetically to occupy flesh and relationship, it is an occupation that desacralizes the living image of God. This demands prompt renunciation and beatification.

Table of Contents

Derek Brown

Palestine: Toward a Critical Theological Aesthetics

"For the sun comes up with its scorching heat and dries up the grass, its flower droops, and the beauty of its appearance vanishes."
--James 1:11

Introduction: Why critical theological aesthetics?

Last spring, I led a discussion at Babson College, my undergraduate alma-matter, about the oppression of Palestinian people. I began the talk by sharing a brief history of the Palestinian occupation. My belief was that the discussion of the injustices of 1948 and 1967 would elicit an emotional response from my audience. It did, but not in the manner or mode in which I anticipated. Some of my Jewish listeners voiced concerns that the plight of Palestinians was receiving "too much attention." Palestinians in the room each offered various critiques of my historical narrative—often these critiques reflected a view that my narrative did not accurately capture a sense of personal loss; a critique fitting, perhaps, of any narrative delivered by an outsider. American listeners showed a mixed response. Some listeners did not show engagement of any kind, and their silence spoke as much to their political convictions as did the actions of those who vehemently argued for Israel's "right to self defense." My point is not to belabor the brute fact of plurality in political opinion. Rather, my experience helped confirm my suspicion that the raising of (new) historical information, far from being revelatory, is

more commonly read through whichever preexistent hermeneutic is valued by the recipient. New stories are more commonly read with old grammars.

This insight, which is hardly original, is partly why Israeli historian Illan Pappé has called for a "new dictionary" of Palestinian liberation. This new dictionary "contains decolonization, regime change, one-state solution" and is designed to challenge the "hegemonic discourse employed by both the powers that be and the solidarity movement with Palestine."[1] That is, rather than (primarily) speak of the need for coexistence between Israel and Palestine, Pappé encourages activists to speak of the need for Israeli to decolonize Palestine; to not work through a "peace process," but to instead demand an Israeli regime change; to avoid capitulation of the land, and instead insist upon the rights of all to live in a shared state. In short, the popular narratives that shape public understanding of the conflict must be belied. The hegemonic discourse—hegemonic at least among the American public[2]—is that of Israel's "right to self-defense." This must be fought with anti-hegemonic, subversive, and in America, counter-cultural, narratives: perhaps narratives built upon and focused on Israel's war crimes and commitments to injustice. Those who "read-off" my discussion of the 1948 and 1967 injustices need, in Pappé's view, to be hermeneutically challenged: historical

[1] Pappé, I. (2015). The Old and New Conversations. In F. Barat (ed) *On Palestine* (9-49). Chicago: Haymarket Books.

[2] In fact, despite the United Nation Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's recent condemnation of Israeli policies toward and attacks on Gaza, American favorability of Benjamin Netanyahu has increased since

[2] In fact, despite the United Nation Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's recent condemnation of Israeli policies toward and attacks on Gaza, American favorability of Benjamin Netanyahu has increased since the late 90s. Likewise, the percentage of Americans who think America is "not supportive enough" of Israel has grown over the past three years. See http://www.pollingreport.com/israel.htm for related information.

and current injustices will not demand revolutionary political action so long as they are interpreted as just. Justice comes when injustice is recognized as such.

This reeducation of the Western masses may very well be a necessary condition for the liberation of Palestinian people. As Noam Chomsky notes, it is unlikely that Palestinian freedom is possible without a change in American state policy—this because of America's obdurate support of Israel's crimes.[3] However, there is some reason for hope. There is a long history of oppressive American foreign policy changing in favor of liberation, often after being the last international hold out, and there is no reason to think such a change is impossible now.[4] A change in public opinion would only serve to help initiate such policy changes, and changes in discourse—a "new dictionary"—would only serve to help change public opinion.

Tragically, Palestinian victims do not have the leisure of waiting for the American public to undergo a discourse-driven reeducation campaign. To again quote Chomsky: "The clock of destruction continues at every historical juncture at a much faster pace than our clock of ideas on how to get out of this."[5] If Pappé's new dictionary is necessary for liberation, it is in no way sufficient as an immediate platform. Pappé himself hints at this recognition: "The relevant question is while one waits for the fundamental change in American policy, can one win small battles vis-à-vis its policies? Are there loopholes that would … stop isolated atrocious cases?" For Pappé, in order to stop "isolated

---

[3] Chomsky, N. (2014). *The Nightmare in Gaza.* Retrieved from: http://www.alternet.org/world/noam-chomsky-nightmare-gaza

[4] Chomsky, N. (2014). *Outrage*. Retrieved from: http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article39311.htm

[5] Chomsky, N. and Pappe, I. (2015). The Past. In F. Barat (ed.) *On Palestine* (49-77). Chicago: Haymarket Books.

atrocious cases" one must find political loopholes. Or else, one can have "optimism," as Pappé does, that a "catalytic event" will occur and subsequently shift public and state opinion.[6] Thus, I am in agreement with Pappé and Chomsky that both a basic shift in discourse and something more immediate, something that will initiate or at least quicken change—a "catalytic event"—are necessary for Palestinian liberation.

This "catalytic event" is what I would like to pursue. Pappé hypothetically suggests that the falling of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia could serve as this event. Perhaps. And, with oil prices instable and environmental movements finally taking off, Pappé's once far-fetched hypothetical may be nearer to reality than previously thought.[7] My hope though, and my interest here, is that this "catalytic event" has *already occurred*. Further, it is *always occurring*. The brutality of occupation—and here the occupation of Palestine must be recognized, if nothing else, as *brutal*—is not waiting on a justice-bringing event, but actively suppresses justice. If justice is beautiful, and I hope to show that it is, then occupation is unjust because it is a constant defacement of beauty: occupation is ugliness. Hence, a thesis: ugliness is our catalyst.

And so the sort of "reeducation of the masses" that I am after here is not a reeducation of discourse; it is at least not discursive if discourse is understood as grammatical or lexical. While the contributions of post-structuralism, literary theory,

---

[6] Chomsky, N. and Pappe, I. (2015). The Present. In F. Barat (ed.) *On Palestine* (77-99). Chicago: Haymarket Books.

[7] The fact that the environmental movement has some indirect affect on Palestinian liberation shows both the integrity of justice—and beauty, which I will argue—and the intricate role Palestine plays in a plethora of political and moral issues of the day. We cannot understand the refugee crisis without understanding Palestine. We cannot understand the environment without understanding Palestine. We cannot understand colonialism or late capitalism without understanding Palestine. Finally, we cannot understand or do aesthetics without engaging the sheer ugliness of the occupation.

and colonial studies are influential on me and are undoubtedly an ally in this fight, my concerns are aesthetic. As a practicing theologian, my concerns are theologically aesthetic. As someone interested and immersed in the critical philosophy and liberation theology traditions, my concerns are with a *critical* theological aesthetics. What, precisely, this means will be hashed out in due time. For now, I let my understanding of critical theological aesthetics mean that any theological treatment of aesthetics must not privilege the aesthetic category of beauty. Rather, full treatment of aesthetics engages beauty's play partners. Aesthetics is also the study of ugliness. And, with ugliness, the study of injustice and suffering. Our conceptions of beauty and ugliness need challenging. The structures through which we approach these categories are in need of a good critique. If we are serious when we say that God issues a call forward, then we cannot accept the static and formal, if not lackadaisical and numbing, status quo.

There is empirical reason to believe in this political potential of aesthetics. Recently, to take just one example, it was the image of a deceased boy, Aylan Kurdi, washed ashore in Turkey, which spurred interest in the Middle East refugee crisis. Fortunately for victims in Palestine, a theological aesthetics for liberation does not need to wait for more bodies to wash up shore. Christian theology proclaims that our Lamb has already been offered. And yet, it is precisely those who profess Christ as the Lamb of God who most occlude Palestinian liberation. It was originally Christian Zionists, led by Lord Shaftesbury of England in the 1840s, not Jewish Zionists, who insisted on the need for "a country without a nation for a nation without a country." Naim Ateek notes that

Lord Shaftesbury's phrase was the predecessor to the modern Zionist slogan, "A land of no people for a people with no land."[8] Of course, the land in question, modern day Israel, did have people: Palestinians. The seeds of the rejection of Palestinian being were planted by Christians. These Christian Zionists, often engrossed with apocalyptic speculation and millennial fever, are too quickly dismissed by both the academy and mainstream Christianity as naïve and, frankly, intellectually underdeveloped.[9] This dismissal, based on correct judgment, overlooks the very real damage caused by Zionists. The fantasies of these Zionists have caused real suffering. Phantasms have become real insofar as they are really ugly. This damage is inflicted not only upon Palestinians, but also upon the glory of Christ. Indeed, and as will be developed later, to inflict damage upon victims *is* to inflict damage upon Christ. That God can be misappropriated in such a doubly dangerous way is precisely why our theological aesthetics must be *critical*. If theological aesthetics aims to contemplate the beauty of God, a critical theological aesthetics must, among other tasks, question how this beauty is understood and employed.

This criticism will also help define my audience. For if Chomsky is right that no liberation is possible without a change in American policy, and it is true that Christian Zionists are largely responsible for the initial displacement of Palestinian people, then our criticism must be directed toward these people and policies, and toward the harm they have caused. Although the majority of victims are neither Christian nor "western," it is the case that the victimizers—at least the ones I wish to speak about—are largely

[8] Ateek, Naim. (2008) *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books; pg, 83
[9] ibid.

both Christian and western, if not more specifically American. I do not speak on behalf of the victims of Palestine—such temerity would be just vulgar. I do claim, though, to critique the aesthetic categories, structures, and understandings—employed by "my people"—that have contributed to injustice. My allies, then, include those who will join this critique—and I can only hope that the oppressed will find my efforts suitable.

To conclude this introduction, I will argue that faith in the person of God demands faith in the beauty of God. This means that over and above the misunderstandings and misappropriations, there is such a thing as true beauty. We must be critical to engage it. In being critical, we must question the aesthetic assumptions inherent in typical theological aesthetic discourse: relationships between beauty and ugliness, flesh and spirit, the culture industry and God, gazing and relationality, and aesthetics and justice must be fleshed out.

The above will be the task of the first section of my work: to clarify the aesthetic component of theological aesthetics, and to ensure its critical stance. In doing so, I will rely heavily on the work of Theodor Adorno. First, I will show how Adorno's "negative beauty" both challenges and is challenged by a theological conception of beauty. Above all, Adorno's commitment to negativity calls us to rebuke satisfaction with our norms, and this I find essential for theology. My almost sole reliance on Adorno is intentional: because he has received little attention in theological circles—especially aesthetically—the very act of treating Adorno theologically is a critical act. As will become clear, the ossification of the "status quo" is beauty's enemy. And so, taking a point of departure radically removed from the theological status quo is a necessary first critical move. As

the category of "displacement" becomes more important in the argument, this choice will be seen as a necessary "displacement" of traditional sources.[10] Then, after clarifying what is meant by beauty, I will raise some obstacles to approaching beauty. I take these obstacles to have been mostly pointed out by Adorno and Max Horkheimer—and their progeny—in their work on the culture industry. The culture industry forms subjectivity as consumeristic, but we simply cannot approach God as consumers. This part of my text may appear abstract and far removed from the pressing issue of Palestinian liberation. But no. My eye will be forever toward liberation. Throughout the coming rigorous aesthetic analysis, Palestine will be forever present—Palestine is the point of departure of and context for this work. My hope is to show, indeed, that the relationship between the political—liberation—and aesthetics is intrinsic. This intrinsic relationship will be revealed through aesthetics, which is our first word. Further, and I do not wish here to argue this point but rather to presuppose it, I hold that no theology can be properly considered liberation theology without giving account of aesthetics. I am doing, then, an integrated theology. Harsh academic distinctions between theological aesthetics and liberation theology have no place here.

These meditations form the theoretical undergirding for the second half of the text, which is a sort of practice in applied aesthetics. These aesthetic insights will be used to engage the theological concerns raised by Naim Ateek. Because the breadth of Ateek's work demands more attention than I can give it here, I will narrowly focus on

[10] There are, of course, other reasons for avoiding classical and popular conceptions of beauty. To take one example: It seems obvious that I would start with von Balthasar. But von Balthasar's reliance on forms, whether or not this was his intent, carries an essentialist and Platonic baggage. This essentializing and Platonizing baggage cannot be squared with my project.

two of his concerns: suicide bombing and the questioning of God's character. On the negative and dialectical grounds developed in this first half of the text, I will offer an aesthetic critique of suicide bombing that does not devolve into mere moral repudiation or dismissal: Suicide bombing is aesthetically ugly because it trades in the economy of destruction and ugliness, and so does damage to beauty. However, we must not ignore the "truth content" inherent in suicide bombing, and I plan on giving more than recognition to this truth content. Finally, I agree with Ateek that God's character has been called into question. I argue that this is in part because the faithful approach God in the stance of consumer, and not participator. God becomes an object in the marketplace; God is a mere commodity placed in the pantheon and sold to all the bidders. This must change, for everyday that God's beauty is reduced and sold as kitsch we travel further from God's kingdom. The situation is dire, and we have little time to waste.

Part One: Toward Critical Theological Aesthetics

Beauty as Theological Problem

Beauty is dangerous. The beautiful can be taken as an idol, and an aesthetic appreciation might lead to the life of an aesthete, where the "weightier matters" undergo a sort of aesthetic reduction. In von Balthasar's parlance, a theological aesthetic runs the risk of degrading into an aesthetic theology. Concretely, any even rudimentary historical survey will show numerous abuses of beauty: Beauty is constructed to deny the being of the racialized other, beauty falsely construed as glory is given as reason to subjugate groups of people on explicitly religious grounds, displays of awesome form and grandeur are used to cultivate nationalist fever, and so on. With ever an eye to the direct issue at hand—Palestine—we can see how damaging constructions of beauty can be when considering the appropriation of the keffiyeh. The keffiyeh, a symbol of Palestinian resistance, has been appropriated by the west and is sold in mass by cheap retailers like H&M. Our aesthetic sensibilities, and the profits derived therefrom, flout Palestinian resistance.

For these reasons, theological engagement with beauty must be critical. Any uncritical acceptance of current constructions of the beautiful not only risks the above injustices, but, perhaps more theo-centrically, denies the reality that God always has "more" in store for us. Yet at the same time, beauty, qua beauty, demands to be taken

on its own terms: it seems that beauty, despite the range in which it manifests historically—or perhaps this scope is evidence of the fact?—resists conceptualization. Theory cannot "get on top of" beauty, because as soon as it does, beauty ceases to be beautiful.

And so, beauty is enigmatic. We must be critical of beauty, yet if we attempt to judge beauty by or subject beauty to the means of some other criteria—be they political, material, or, even, theological—we lose it. But we must not lose it. I believe that Adorno's aesthetic theory, articulated in *Aesthetic Theory,* provides a helpful way of thinking through this enigma. Adorno's negative dialectics of beauty conceives of beauty as itself always unreconciled: the "negative" is constitutive of beauty, and in this sense, beauty is "the ever broken promise of happiness."[11] Insofar as he supplies and articulates a necessary critical edge for theological aesthetics, I take it that Adorno's insights are instructive for theological aesthetics. This critical edge is found primarily in beauty's dialectic, which, at its simplified core, is the dialectic of renunciation and beatification. While remaining sensitive to Adorno's distrust of theology, I wish here to bring Adorno's critical aesthetics and theology into conversation. Ultimately, theology does not undermine Adorno's aesthetics, but challenges Adorno's aesthetics by introducing new contours to the categories of relationship, hope, and negativity. In bringing Adorno's aesthetics into conversation with theological aesthetics I do not wish to discredit either one in favor of the other. Instead, Adorno provides a rich dialectic for thinking about a revelation-centric negative theological aesthetics, and theology offers a

[11] Adorno, Thedoro. (1996). *Aesthetic Theory*. (Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. (originally published 1970). Page, 136.

way of expanding Adorno's thought. That is, I will treat beauty as a theological problem, but will do so aided by the critical insights formed by Adorno's negative aesthetics

Adorno on the Beautiful and the Ugly

The posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* stands as Adorno's unfinished attempt at producing an historical and critical aesthetics. The book is wide in scope and written paratatically. It lacks direction and simple paragraph breaks. There are few citations. It is as if Adorno wished to create a work that rebelled, in its very form, against the academic market that would receive it.[12] All of which is to say that Adorno's aesthetic theory is critical in form as well as content, and can be analyzed on both fronts. Here is not the place to perform a literary analysis of the function of parataxis for Adorno; however, his desire to eschew what he saw to be the academic status quo gives insight into one of the text's few unifying strands of thought: the negative.

The basic act of renunciation—here exemplified by Adorno's renunciation of what he saw to be the academic status quo—stands, in *Aesthetic Theory*, as beauty's genesis.[13] This renunciation is the renunciation of the ugly. Importantly, it is the act of renunciation that names the ugly and the beautiful as such. It is not that, as in some

[12] Indeed, "throughout his years in the United States, Adorno on many occasions met with the rejection of his work by publishers who saw his writings simply as disorganized." *AT, Introduction,* xiv.
[13] Adorno thinks that a history of German idealism has given beauty an undeservedly privileged place in philosophical aesthetics. There is more to aesthetics than beauty. I agree, but, in staying true to Adorno's own form of immanent criticism, we should meet beauty head on, in order to overcome its rule. Beauty must be worked through.

Platonic scheme, the ugly and the beautiful are "there" and the artist's job is to recognize them as such. The act of renunciation is the primordial aesthetic act:

> Beauty is not the platonically pure beginning but rather something that originated in the renunciation of what was once feared, which only as a result of this renunciation—retrospectively, so to speak, according to its own telos—became the ugly.[14]

Adorno is aware that such a view gives beauty structural, or "formal," contours. This is by design, because to treat beauty as anything but formal would be to resort to an archiving of historical manifestations of the category.[15] This historical reduction on the basis of content would miss that which is fundamental to beauty: its dialectical constitution.[16]

This dialecticism is the dialectic between renunciation and beatification. That is, because beauty renounces the ugly, beauty is always also negating itself. Beauty has to negate itself because Adorno sees beauty's renouncing of the ugly as a sort of "cruelty" to the ugly. Here it is important to remember that, for Adorno, the ugly and the beautiful do not exist *a priori* before this act of renunciation. Thus, the renouncing, by naming the ugly as the ugly, is "cruel" to the ugly, even "violent."[17] And, in being cruel, beauty is always already entangled with ugliness. To say that the beautiful and the ugly have a dialectical relationship is not just to say that the beautiful always arises out of the ugly; rather, it is to say that the ugly is *always* constitutive of the beautiful. Without renunciation—without negation—there is no beauty, but because beauty is born from

---

[14] *AT, 47*
[15] *AT, 51*
[16] Beauty's dialectic forbids an historical archive standing in as a sort of ostensive definition of the category. This is ultimately because beauty, as dialectical, is self-defacing. Any attempt to define beauty through historical archive would be nothing more than an ever-incomplete chasing after beauty's next particular manifestation.
[17] *AT, 48*

scars and, in a sense, "creates" the ugly, it is never free of sin. And so, it soon renounces itself. So on, and so forth.

This may all seem unnecessarily—perhaps perilously—abstract, but developments in art history, at least, seem to give credibility to Adorno's view. Manet's proto-impressionism, for example, was in part a reaction against the representational realism of his time. The beauty of impressionism was that it renounced the objectification found in realism—which was previously held as the standard of beauty. Adorno remarks that abstract impressionism partakes in this dialectic by trying to renounce art altogether: "It is for the sake of the beautiful that there is no longer beauty: because it is no longer beautiful."[18] Here, the dialectic of beauty reaches a fever pitch: abstract impressionism recognizes that beauty itself is ugly, and so tries to renounce it. The stumbling block, though, is that this renunciation of "beauty" is itself a claim to beauty: by producing abstract art, the artist produces beauty. And so, the dialectic marches on.

Now, as this brusque historical example shows, that-which-is-called-ugly is historically dependent (which is not to say, Adorno argues, "contingent").[19] But, again, this historicism does not mean that the category of the ugly cannot follow some basic structural criteria. Indeed, the historical development of beauty suggests its structural form: "The transition to the primacy of form codified by the category of the beautiful inherently tends toward that formalism from which the concept of beauty suffers."[20]

---

[18] *AT, 53*
[19] *AT, 51*
[20] ibid.

That is, as artists struggle with the dialectic of beauty, they constantly turn to form and structure as those elements of the aesthetic object that can overcome and renounce ugliness: the form, as formal and so ideal, is a rejection of the rough and terse status quo that needs to be overcome. But if beauty's dialectic unfolds in history, then so too does ugliness's—for the two inhere. One contour of this structural unfolding, for Adorno, is that the ugly is intimately bound up with suffering: "The aesthetic condemnation of the ugly is dependent on the inclination, verified by social psychology, to equate, justly, the ugly with the expression of suffering and, by projecting it, to despise it."[21] If we are to be at all honest with empirical reality, then we must admit that suffering *is* ugly. Thus, given what has been said about the relationship between ugliness and beauty, that which renounces suffering must be beautiful.

Ugliness as suffering seems to make good phenomenological sense, but phenomenology is not what Adorno is doing. By identifying ugliness with suffering he is not making a claim as to some essence of ugliness. Rather, he is making note that the category of ugliness is employed in such a way as to aesthetically value suffering. What counts as suffering is mediated aesthetically. That is, suffering is deemed ugly when one wants to be rid of it. At the same time, the oppressed, who suffer oppression, are deemed ugly by virtue of the fact that they have been renounced by their oppressors. Nietzsche's trace must be recognized: the ugly are ugly because they are renounced, and the beautiful are beautiful because they do the renouncing. This relationship is cruel because, for Adorno, there is no "real" or "true" beauty that resides behind these

[21] *AT, 49*

socially constructed beauties, which arise out of renunciations. Thus, while it is aesthetically correct to say that the oppressive beauty of the status quo is also always ugly, it is incorrect to attribute this ugliness to its failure to correspond with some ideal type or form of "Beauty."

And so there is an inherent relationship between aesthetics and ethics. Or rather, there is an aesthetic mediation of the ethical. Relationships of power—those relationships between oppressed and oppressor—give themselves in aesthetic forms. It is not just that political relationships construct notions of the beautiful. In such a schema, aesthetics would be reducible to the political. Rather, aesthetics *are* political by virtue of their dialectic, which deals with social relationships and treats of ugliness and suffering. It may very well be "natural" that one finds suffering to be ugly, but what specific content one counts as suffering is socially mediated. The meat of the argument here is that the fact that some people suffer and others suffer less—the fact that some are ugly and some are beautiful—is historically and socially mediated, not natural. It is because of these competing interests and histories that beauty, despite having one form, can manifest with such varying content.

Here we may wonder whether or not there is a difference at all between ethics and aesthetics, or if such identifying the ugly with suffering has conflated the disciplines. For Adorno, who was not as radical in claims to mediation as some of the postmoderns who follow him, the primordial suffering that is named ugly does exist before it is named ugly. It exists as part of an undifferentiated, nameless mass of matter which he, paradoxically, names "first nature." Because we are social beings, we only have access

to this "first nature" as mediated; that is, as "second nature."[22] So, suffering is given as always mediated. That is, we never have access to first, or unmediated, nature. Yet, we must claim its reality. If we do not make this transcendent claim—and here is Kant's trace—then social constructions of the beautiful are all we have. In this sense, first nature is a sort of apparition: it appears as never real, always ghostly. From our situation in the mediated world, we make appear—we hallucinate—the first nature. In this sense, aesthetics are, for Adorno, always a bit haunted, and always, ultimately, deceitful. This deceit, though, promises happiness, promises beauty, promises to renounce suffering.

Such, in short, is Adorno's conception of beauty. Beauty and ugliness have a formally dialectical relationship to each other: the beautiful is that which renounces the ugly, and the ugly is that which is renounced. However, by engaging in the act of renouncing, beauty becomes "cruel," and thus incorporates ugliness into itself, which it must then renounce. Beauty is never pure. The oppressor and aesthetic decider cannot escape beauty's absolute negativity: beauty, rather, escapes the oppressor. Beauty flees from the ugliness and cruelty of renouncing others, and escapes untouched—but ghostly. This formal relationship is always filled with particular social and historical content. The next section will explore the role of art in undermining all manifestations of this content. In short, art, by always renouncing the world, points toward the utopic image.

[22] *AT, 87;* For more on this, see especially: Martin Hielscher (2009), "Adorno and Aesthetic Theory," retrievable from: http://www.egs.edu/faculty/martin-hielscher/lectures/. Here, as elsewhere, a lingering Kantianism haunts Adorno's work. This Kantianism was in part a reaction against Hegel's speculative dialectics.

Art and the Negative Image

Adorno's treatment of art is, in part, a reaction to German idealism. If Kant saw natural beauty as higher than artistic beauty, and if Hegel saw fine art as the proper object of aesthetics, then Adorno wishes to complicate this hierarchy of fine and natural beauty. Again making use of his first and second nature distinction, Adorno holds that we only have access to natural beauty through artistic beauty. This is because any approach to what is commonly called "nature" is always already mediated; it is always, in fact, an approach to "second nature." Art's promise is that it can present natural beauty: art, by creating and using the mediated world, can imagine natural, non-mediated, beauty. In perhaps his most mystical moment, Adorno describes the relationship as follows:

> Artworks say that something exists in itself, without predicating anything about it. … With human means art wants to realize the language of what is not human. … The total subjective elaboration of art as a nonconceptual language is the only figure, at the contemporary stage of rationality, in which something like the language of the divine creation is reflected, qualified by the paradox that what is reflected is blocked. Art attempts to imitate an expression that would not be interpolated human intention.[23]

The passage demands some unpacking. Adorno's repeated references to "human means" and "intentions" are references to the mediation of "second nature." Nature is given as mediated. Art, though, promises to somehow overcome this mediation and give the immediate. That is, art falsely promises the nonhuman. Art, through its ability to avoid conceptualization—maybe even because of its antithesis to conceptualization—promises to transcend our social constructions and the trap of mediated experience.

[23] *AT, 77*

For Adorno, this promise, which would amount to happiness, is never realized. Because there is no transcendent truth, in order to promise transcendence, art must feign divine creation: it must promise to create something out of nothing. It is precisely this "nothing" that captures Adorno's critical eye. For, although it is not the case that art can give itself immediately—it is, upon creation, mediated by its "situation"[24]—it is the case that art can obstinately negate that which it comes from and comes into. Art radically negates the empirical world. This negation occurs by virtue of the fact that it creates out of "empirical reality" something that is not, by reality's own standards, empirical reality. The content of an artwork is artistic content, not part of the administered world. In this way, every act of creation is a rejection of the empirical world insofar as its content resides outside of the empirical world. Adorno says that the empirical world, especially the enlightenment world of world-constituting subjects, has become enchanted with itself. Art, because of beauty's attraction, offers a sort of counter-hegemonic enchantment: "By their very existence artworks postulate the existence of what does not exist and thereby come into conflict with the latter's actual nonexistence."[25] For this reason, "the new is akin to death."[26] This is what is meant by negativity.

But this "no" that art constantly cries out to the world, which is a promise of a better world, is never satisfied. As a radical no, it cannot be satisfied. For Adorno, the no, the not-here, is constitutive of the yes and the now. Utopia, then, which is art's

[24] *AT, 27*
[25] *AT, 59*
[26] *AT, 21*

promise, is a *negative image*. Because the beautiful is also always ugly, and must then also always renounce itself, we can never escape total criticism. The image of utopia exists, but it exists as that-which-is-not. The "is" here is ontological, not phenomenological. Put otherwise, nonexistence, or "not-here," the "negative," is constitutive of utopia. Again poetically, Adorno ruminates on this sad fate:

> Art does not have it in its power to decide over the possibility that everything may indeed not come to anything more than nothing; it has its fictiveness in the assertion implicit in its existence that it has gone beyond the limit. … Artworks are *a priori* negative by the law of their objectivation: They kill what they objectify by tearing it away from the immediacy of its life. Their own life preys on death.[27]

How cruel indeed! Here, art's absolute negativity is approached two different ways, and the ways converge. First, art is negative because "the limit," the mediated second nature of empirical reality, cannot be transcended—at least not by art. Indeed, by creating, art adds something to empirical reality: an artwork. The artwork's content is not the content of the empirical world, but the empirical world appropriates and mediates the artwork nonetheless. Art pretends to have transgressed these limits, but all it has done is shifted them. At its best, art negates one status quo and brings about another. The formal character of beauty remains the same, and it is still filled with particular and historically dependent content. Complimentarily, art is always negative because *if* indeed there was such a thing as immediacy, art must kill it in order to be art. Art, by speaking, destroys mute immediacy. Thus, while art promises happiness, and indeed is quite beautiful, its promises are always empty, and its beauty is always prime for negation. The artist is the beautiful liar.

This incapability of imagining natural beauty is theology's first point of entry:

[27] *AT, 133*

> The Old Testament prohibition on images has an aesthetic as well as a theological dimension. That one should make no image, which means no image of anything whatsoever, expresses at the same time that it is impossible to make such an image. Through its duplication in art, what appears in nature is robbed of its being-in-itself, in which the experience of nature is fulfilled. [28]

For Adorno, then, the Abrahamic prohibition on images is more descriptive than prescriptive: one simply cannot imagine the divine, and for the reasons mentioned—it would result in mediation and objectification, it would give speech to the mute, it would find some positive result from absolute negation, and so on. As a contemporary theologian interested in both liberation and aesthetics, I am not satisfied with letting the relationship between theology and Adorno's aesthetics end with this musing on the Old Testament. Instead, I want to pursue Adorno's aesthetic insights to their theological limit: Must beauty's promise always be broken? This pursuit is the goal of the next section.

Differentiating Between Adorno's Conception of Beauty and Christ's Beauty

For Adorno, then, beauty is found in art, which tries to show natural beauty through artistic beauty. Precisely, though, this is where beauty is found materially, or empirically. Structurally, beauty is found where ugliness is renounced. For theology, this structure and material coincide in the person of Jesus. Eventually, I will explicate this structure with a meditation on the Cross, and will explicate this material with a meditation on the prologue of John's gospel. It is my claim that an identity of promise and fulfillment of promise has occurred in Christ, and this identity offers new

[28] *AT, 93*

possibilities for Adorno's thought. Precisely: The negative utopic image need not be only hallucination; rather, it is the claim of theology that this absolute negative image *is* the person of Jesus. The incarnation is both the revelation of formal beauty *par excellence* and the absolute renunciation of ugliness. The remainder of this section will work toward unpacking this thesis.

To say that the incarnation is both formally and materially the absolute revelation of the beautiful is somewhat tautological. If the form is absolute, then so must be the content. And vice-versa. Now, where theology must begin to draw its line against Adorno is precisely in this claim to absoluteness: for Adorno, the revelation of Christ is not a revelation of anything but another form of second nature—there is no transcendent truth to which it can appeal. On the one hand, theology can simply disagree, it can, in faith, presuppose the reality of the truth of revelation, and take Christ's transcendent reality as given. Maybe such presupposing is on some level inescapable—contemporary critics of Adorno accuse him of eventually resorting to a transcendental positive ethics, because how can we know suffering without presupposing some form of the good?—but my goals are more explicitly aesthetic. Rather than appeal to the presupposed *truth* of revelation, I take it that the method of theological aesthetics ought to be to engage seriously with the *beauty* of revelation. In this way, we do not need to presuppose, I think, the supernatural. Rather, we can confront revelation, engage it, participate with it, and see for ourselves the negative in it.

Now, if we can escape Adorno's criticism by avoiding direct appeals to the supernatural, we must be firmer against Adorno when it comes to "the limit" here on earth. But even on this point, ultimately, we can use Adorno's immanent criticism to make theological room. For Adorno, as has been discussed, the promise of beauty—which is happiness—can never be fulfilled. For theology, the promise of Christ not only will be fulfilled, but indeed is fulfillment itself. Thus a crucial difference between Adorno's negative beauty and the beauty of Christ is whether or not we take beauty to be trustworthy. For Adorno, the "truth content" of an artwork is that, in encounter with art, the subject comes face to face with its own finitude, with its own negation.[29] Contrary to Hegelian dialectics, Adorno's negative dialectics says that the subject and the beautiful piece are non-identical: the subject has no domination over the thing, is not the thing, and never will be the thing. Fair enough. But the particular logic of aesthetic encounter with Christ—Christ's own "truth content"—says not just that subject and beautiful piece are non-identical, but that the subject, the faithful, is somehow dependent on the beautiful Christ. There is both autonomy and dialogue, or both freedom and dependence. Christ is both beauty and person, and so aesthetic encounter with Christ is both one of aesthetic admiration and one of personal relationship. But because it is the person of Christ that does the aesthetic renouncing, it is ultimately the person of Christ that is beautiful. In Christ, the aesthetic and the personal coincide. Whereas Adorno sees the aesthetic relationship as ultimately one of tragedy, the theological aesthetic relationship is ultimately one of (still non-identical)

[29] *AT, 128; for more on Adorno and aesthetic truth, see: Nikolaus Fogle, " Beautiful Places in Adorno's Aesthetics," retrievable from: http://www.uqtr.ca/AE/Vol_15/Authenticity/Authenticity_Fogle.htm*

relationship. Put otherwise, for Adorno, finitude is a sign of "the limit." For theological aesthetics, finitude is a sign of relationship, and thus of expansion and love.

There are certainly other important differences between a theological aesthetics and Adorno's critical aesthetics. However, I take this difference—that between tragedy and the promise and offer of relationship—to be prominent. While staying true to Adorno's rejection of supernatural realms, I have tried to show that theology still has something to offer to aesthetics that a radically critical—as Adorno conceives it—aesthetics does not; namely, non-identical, aesthetic, personal relationship.

But how does this personal aesthetic relationship look? It is one thing to say that relationship is constitutive of the Christ encounter, but what does it mean to say that this relationship is an aesthetic relationship? Following Adorno's aesthetic negative dialectics, it means that *renunciation* is the relationship's primordial act. When it comes to Christ, this renunciation is achieved in God's becoming flesh. John's prologue shows that this divine renunciation has unexpected contours—eventually, we see, renunciation itself is beatified:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. … And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

In taking up flesh, God takes up a space and body in our shared, aesthetic history. God becomes a person who can be perceived, and who can perceive with us. And so God's aesthetic call, the call of beauty, is never just to admire God's beauty, but is also to perceive and do beauty as Christ did. As "light of the human race," Christ illumines not

just divine truth but also flesh itself. The prologue is a radical materialization of beauty. Beauty cannot be merely transcendent, because absolute beauty, Christ himself, was made of matter, ate with us, walked with us, and gazed with us. By doing miracles here in the flesh—miracles that were unexpectedly concerned with physical well-being; Jesus fed and healed—Jesus brought beauty here, to the flesh. Hence Christ unsettles the old and worn distinction between "divine" and "worldly" or "supernatural" and "natural" beauty: No, we can speak plainly of beauty and ugliness, of participating with Christ, in the flesh, or not.

Yet, in order to do beauty, Christ subjects himself to the ugliness of the world. Christ did not come only as flesh, but as poor flesh, ugly flesh, in truth, occupied Palestinian flesh. By remaining obedient and loyal to the Word of God and refusing to stray from the way of love—the way that he revealed to be the way of the kingdom—Christ knew that the powerful would renounce him. By remaining faithful to true beauty, Christ would face true ugliness: he would be renounced, he would be murdered. This is where Adorno's aesthetics stops. For Adorno, the crucifiers have the last word: The cruel crucifiers name Christ ugly, and their ways of domination remain accepted as "beauty." But for us, for John, for Christ, there is a renunciation of another sort. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Because Christ stays true to beauty—which renounces ugliness always and everywhere—to the very end, Christ renounces the darkness that kills him. This is not a fighting darkness with darkness, a fighting ugliness with more of the same. No, it is what Adorno could not fathom: it is a beautiful renunciation, a renunciation of forgiveness: "Father, forgive

them, they know not what they do." In the midst of total darkness, Christ remains light, remains beautiful.

"Forgive them," and so, renunciation finds its fulfillment in the Cross. The Cross is beautiful not because of some static, predicated, reified property of crucifixion, but, because as salvation history, it renounces the ugliness to which it responds—and which it leaves behind. The Cross is that *revealed* moment that radically says no to the world in a way that Adorno could conceive of as only utopic. Which is to say, the Cross, which is in the world, beatifies the world by renouncing the ugliness in and of the world. Compare this to art: Art, for Adorno, says no to the world, but it can only say no to the world by imagining a negative utopia. The Cross on the other hand, in its scandalous aesthetics, says no to the world by saying yes to the world: it reveals here in order to beatify the here, but does so by renouncing all that is ugly here. In this way, theological aesthetics is both more material and more immanent than Adorno's aesthetics: the world is beatified by working through the world, not through ghosts and apparitions.

The Cross rejects the ugliness that falls short of Christ's beauty, and does so by ever affirming forgiveness and love as content that shape the contours of Christ's life. This means that, in a move that further separates the aesthetics of the Cross from Adorno's aesthetics of art, the Cross renounces the world by forgiving it. In an ultimate move that Nietzsche found unpardonable, Christ's beauty is so radically negative that it ultimately rejects rejection itself: Christ's beauty rejects ugliness not cruelly, which was the only way Adorno, surely a product of his "situation," knew, but through forgiveness, which is to say, beautifully.

So, the Cross, as renunciation-forgiveness, is the primordial act for Christian theological aesthetics. The Cross, the whole Pascale mystery, is the materialization of John's pronouncement that darkness has not overcome the light. Renunciation remains the primordial aesthetic act, but the form of renunciation has been transfigured. But I am not here straying far from Adorno. On the contrary, I think the Cross illustrates the fulfillment of aesthetics as both dialectical and negative, and these components of the Cross's aesthetic deserve some attention.

Following Adorno's aesthetics, the Cross, qua beautiful, is dialectical. I have already elaborated this dialectics as one of "renunciation and beatification." This dialectic is historical: it exists in time, and renounces in particular historical places and moments. A great strength of Adorno's aesthetics is that Adorno was able to "materialize" aesthetics, and I have already suggested one way in which a theological aesthetics is more material than Adorno's. Reciprocally—and especially important for aesthetic engagements with liberation theology—ugliness is not a theoretical construct, but *is* the renounced of the earth. Things, places, and, at least for Adorno, people are ugly—just as it is to things, places, and people that we ought to turn to find the beautiful. If we want to further beatify the earth, then we only need to find suffering, mark it as ugly, and partake in the process of doing beauty. Because it is actively dialectical, Adorno has made "beauty" more verb than noun. One does beauty. Aesthetics are lived.

I suggest that, theologically, this doing of beauty is achieved by partaking in the "life-form" illustrated by Christ and the Cross. We know what to renounce, because the

Word has told us.[30] Beauty has been revealed, and we participate in it. Adorno also holds that the subject participates in objective beauty, but it is society at large that underwrites the objectivity of his beauty. Here, I am merely suggesting that the Cross, which as revealed is part of society, offers both a renunciation and a beatification of the world, and that Christ revealed the particular contours—the specific content—necessary for partaking in and responding to this dialectic. Thus, theological aesthetics is material (but surely not just material) on both ends: it stems from an earthly revelation, and it deals with specific and particular things here on earth.

For Adorno, of course, the dialectic is always negative, and no reconciliation is ever had between renunciation and beatification. I have also suggested that, because the Cross's particular logic is renunciation-forgiveness, it may offer a way beyond negative dialectics: by renouncing renunciation itself in favor of forgiveness, the Cross may negate the category of negation—and so beauty would triumphantly survive the dialectic. However, such logic risks that which is gained by recognizing the historical dialectics of the Cross. It is not as if the Cross, as one off event, once and only once negated dialectics. Rather, the Cross, as living and relational, constantly lives and constantly negates. The Cross, as part of salvation history, is historical. This historical and living negation is the beauty in which we can partake.

[30] Clearly a certain hermeneutics needs to be involved here: I am not naively suggesting that, just because revelation has happened, that somehow Christendom ought or can interpret revelation to mean something uniform. Perhaps this itself would be contrary to the spirit of revelation. Here, then, and although I have avoided him in an effort to be "more critical," I must lean on volume one of von Balthasar's *The Glory of the Lord:* we know Christ by His own Spirit, and are pulled to know so by His Glory.

The tension here is as follows: How can the Cross be at once definitive—in that it offers forgiveness—and produce a living, historical dialectic? The form of negativity found in the Cross explains this tension. Returning to Adorno's comments on the Old Testament prohibition of images, we see that Adorno misunderstands the doxological content of the prohibition: We can build icons, but not idols. This is because we know that every effort to see and represent God will assuredly fail, but so long as we point and work toward God, then we move in the right direction. Aesthetically: God reveals beauty (by renouncing ugliness), and our attempts to live in and participate in God's dialectic never do justice to God's beauty. *It is never enough, but it is still beautiful.* The Kingdom move is to renounce that part of our praxis and theology that falls shorts, and so on and so forth, all the while doing beauty. Such is the aesthetic dialectic.

We are reminded of Adorno's utopia, with a rather stark difference: For Adorno, the "not here" is constitutive of the "here." For theological aesthetics interested in the participation of the building of the Kingdom, it is the "not *yet* here" that is constitutive of the "here." The addition of the "*yet"* introduces hope, and it is a hope that is founded not in the pie in the sky supernatural, but in the revealed content of faith: Our hope in the reconciliation of earth's renunciation and earth's beatification finds its legs in what has been revealed here on earth. By becoming flesh, Christ has entered our history to promise that darkness will not overcome the light. The light, though, is still negative: beauty requires work and renunciation, and we can never rest easy with the status quo: beauty is lived, active, demands more. In this way, the Cross does not, like Adorno's artwork, promise happiness. By always demanding more, the Cross's beauty promises

failure. But also forgiveness. We hope in the future to come with the promise that God's beauty is greater than whatever we can create. Absolute beauty has been revealed and killed, and now we hope and rebuild.

Summary

And so, theological aesthetics could benefit from incorporating a critical edge. Theodor Adorno's work can help provide that edge. Conceiving of beauty as dialectical and negative, Adorno successfully materialized and historicized aesthetics. Although he was no fan of theology, Adorno's framework offers room for a revelation-centric theological aesthetics to flourish. I, too, hold that beauty is socially and historically to Adorno insofar as it sheds a different light on the limits of "second nature." Where Adorno, perhaps still influenced by a sort of Kantian subjectivism, sees contact with the aesthetic object as bringing me to the limit and as a confrontation with mortality, the Christ encounter is an encounter both with beauty and with person, and so both brings me to my limit and expands it. Because of this relationality—which does not betray Adorno's method but merely considers a possibility that he did not—theology offers hope, where Adorno sees only the promise of broken promises. We, though, see fulfilled promise as revealed in Jesus. The Cross offers forgiveness, and does so in history and does so dialectically; that is, it always renounces ugliness and reveals beauty. As revealed, Christ's beauty allows a relationship of participation with it, and it is the life of faith to claim that such revelation is God's revelation. Finally, constitutive

negativity can be, and in the case of the Cross *is*, of the form "not yet here." This form of negativity offers hope based on promise, and is the proper theological form.

Now, this preliminary conversation between Adorno's aesthetics and theological aesthetics is far from complete. If my analysis has taken Christ as *the* absolute beautiful social fact—in a sea of social constructions—then how is the Christian to engage with other social constructions and other social facts? And so, this approach raises interreligious and, given Adorno's atheism, religious-secular dialogue concerns. Although I have already claimed my audience as Christians, I do not want to offend or undermine the very people—Palestinians—with whom I wish to side. Another concern: what, precisely, does "renouncing" the ugly look like in a contemporary context—especially given Christ's model of forgiveness? Much work has been done on the dialectic of repentance and forgiveness, and I fear that my analysis has not given enough respect to this work; that is, I worry that, paradoxically, this critical aesthetics may lead to a sort of quietism, at least if the "forgiveness" component of the dialectic acts as a pseudo-synthesis. Far from quietism, I hold that the materiality of this aesthetics leads to a demand for action—walls, checkpoints, and other material strongholds of ugliness must be beatified. This beatification of dirt and grime, and not just structure and form, will be addressed shortly. However, despite these concerns, my major concern is this: Have we, we in the west who have allowed apartheid to occur under our nose and with our money, become so administered and removed from beauty that God's glory no longer holds sway over us? It appears that this may be so. Thus, the next section of this work will provide a brief overview of Adorno and Horkheimer's account of the "culture

industry” and how this industry may prevent us from engaging with and participating in beauty. For aesthetic rigor is simply useless if beauty is unapproachable. The above was about beauty, the following is about how to approach it.

Part Two: The Culture Industry

Two Concerns: Production of Sameness, Constitution of Consumerism

That a discussion of aesthetics should be concerned with "culture," never mind "industry," may or may not be obvious. However, that a discussion of *critical* aesthetics must account for culture should, by this point, be clear. The beautiful and the ugly are social, and so they are cultural. Theologically, I have argued that the beauty of Christ both renounces and beautifies this world, and, with it, worldly cultures. As negative, this beauty calls for ever-greater participation. Any such participation occurs as mediated by what Adorno calls "the situation," a part of which is surely culture. All of this be unpacked. Eventually, I intend to show that the culture industry argument advanced by Adorno and Max Horkheimer is dependent upon Adorno's aesthetics. Even though *Aesthetic Theory* came temporally after the culture industry writings, aesthetic theory comes logically prior to an understanding of the culture industry; put otherwise, aesthetics is a condition for culture. Adorno's writings on the culture industry are too often read out of their proper aesthetic context—they are not (merely) the ravings of a grump, but are (also) the result of rigorous aesthetic thinking.

But it does not take a keen or rigorous aesthetic spirit to discern that the western culture of today is antithetical to participation in Christ's beauty: economic inequalities, political oppressions, social alienations, suburban depression, urban despair, and a certain—and terrifying—nationalism have all become recognizably

"western." Whatever else is meant by "western," and whatever else the "west" is or is not, it takes but little engagement with it to recognize that *this* culture—whatever precisely it is—provides a logic for oppression and apartheid. This logic manifests in museums, where the most commercial products are often marketed as the most beautiful products; or where, at least, class distinctions are ossified ("low culture" representational oil paintings are partitioned far from "high culture" abstract and performative pieces). And this logic manifests itself in our relationship with God, who is too often approached as a commodity. Thus, this logic of the west—its culture—operates on two levels: it constitutes intention (gazing, praying-as-buying) and it constitutes the intended (the museum, "God"). These two poles cannot, of course, be ontologically separated. However, my primary focus here is on the subject-constituting power of culture. This power is what Adorno most trenchantly critiqued.

The term "culture industry" first found widespread use in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightment* (1944), which is a core text of the Frankfurt School.[31] In 1963, Adorno returned to and clarified themes explored in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with his brief but influential essay, "Culture industry reconsidered."[32] In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer appear primarily concerned with articulating the sameness produced by the culture industry. In the later essay, Adorno stresses that people subjected to the culture industry are constituted as consumers built

[31] Adorno, Thedoro, & Horkheimer, Max. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (Edmund Jephcott, trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. (originally published 1944).

[32] Adorno, Theodor. (1991). "Culture industry reconsidered," from *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture.* (JM Bernstein, trans.) London: Routledge. Retrieved from: http://www.sociosite.net/topics/texts/adorno_culture_reconsidered.pdf

for consuming sameness. In fact, this essay makes clear that the produced sameness of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the sameness of the consumer. Hence, while the two writings have different concerns and rhetorical strategies, it would be a mistake to take them as addressing disparate phenomena. Theologically, I take it that this subjective constitution has changed the basic way one thinks of and approaches God.

I should not make too strong a distinction between the objective sameness discussed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the constitution of subjectivity-as-consumerist found in "Culture industry reconsidered." The two claims imply each other, and this implication will be a turning point for my own text. However, the fact that Adorno's focus seems to change between the two works is suggestive: The rhetoric of sameness suggests inescapability and monotony; the rhetoric of subjectivity, though, at least hopes for freedom: the subject need not surrender to total administration at the hands of industry. Art is still art, and art's promise, if not the piece of art itself, escapes commoditization: precisely this is art's promise. Ultimately, this aesthetic renunciation of the commodification of the aesthetic is where theology must prepare for battle. In due time. First, it is necessary to work out in closer fashion what Adorno, and Horkheimer in the earlier text, meant by "culture industry."

As good critical theory ought do, I should contextualize the idea of the culture industry. Adorno and Horkheimer's initial work on the culture industry is the essay "Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." This essay is a chapter of the text *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As a whole, the text is concerned with "showing that the cause of enlightenment's relapse into mythology is … the fear of truth which petrifies

enlightenment itself."[33] Enlightenment reason seeks to dominate. This domination especially seeks to exercise control over nature. The dialectical stumble arises when reason must construct myths of nature in order to dominate nature. That is, enlightenment reason must presuppose and invent—give substance to—the very thing it wants to dominate. In this way, enlightenment reason itself becomes a myth. The relationship between the ordering and dominating rationalism of Descartes and other Enlightenment thinkers finds mythical substance in its construction of a dominate-able and orderly nature. The myths of dominating reason and dominated nature are two sides of the same coin. This mythologizing of nature rebukes not only domination (indeed it is the presupposition of domination, and so domination is dependent on myth), but also truth itself: "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology."[34] Myth and enlightenment run together, and in the dialectic between the two, enlightenment's dominating reason undermines itself.

It is from these dominating roots that the culture industry sprouts. Interested only in domination, and constantly threatened by its own undoing, enlightenment normalizes the calculable as the real: "For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion."[35] Because enlightenment wants to order and dominate nature by way of reason, anything that does not conform to order and reason is deemed unnatural, unworthy of the mantle of the real. So while I maintain the reading that the culture industry of *Dialectic*

[33] *DE*, xvi.
[34] ibid.
[35] *DE, 3*

of Enlightenment was primarily concerned with objective consequences, already we can see subjective political dimensions unfold: only those subjects who are orderly and open to reason's domination are deemed real. Those who resist ordering and the norms of reason are treated with suspicion at best, and vitriol and genocide at worst.

And so, intellectual history, philosophy, dialectics, ideology, and normalization all co-penetrate and lead to the place where truth is resisted. Adorno and Horkheimer are careful here: it is not that one truth is rejected in favor of some other, or even that truth is rejected in favor of falsity. Rather, *truth* as such is resisted. Enlightenment, which cannot escape myth but must dominate myth, tries to reject all trace of the metaphysical or epistemological in favor of the object. And so the culture industry is that process by which cultural objects are sold not as true or false, not as ends of means, but as self-sufficient myths. Yes, the marketer tells the consumer that she has an artificial need, and the consumer then purchases a product. This is perhaps bad enough. The situation is worse, though: neither the marketer *nor* the consumer actually believe in the need. All is myth. The consumer knows that the marketed product cannot truly fulfill the artificial need, nor does she have any pretense that the artificial need is a true need—but truth is not what is sought after.

This resistance to truth is what the culture industry most fervently seeks to foster and protect. However, and here the connection with aesthetics is made explicit, it is unable to do so. The culture industry wants to mindlessly stir out allegedly apolitical, truthless products. But, as cultural and aesthetic products, they necessarily have a political and social component. Here an understanding of Adorno's aesthetics is crucial

for an understanding of the totalizing nature of the culture industry.[36] It is not just that the culture industry rejects the disorderly and unreasonable—although it does this (often by subjecting the disorderly and unreasonable to another type of order: the insane have their "natural," orderly place in the asylum, for instance). Over and beyond this normalizing tendency, *the culture industry is totalizing because the aesthetic products it produces do not show the negative utopic image.* Rather than fostering autonomous works of art and the "disenchantment with disenchantment" that these works produce, the culture industry churns out "Volkswagons and sports palaces" which are "themselves becoming metaphysics, an ideological curtain, within the social whole, behind which real doom is gathering."[37] That is, the culture industry, which is the result of the dialectic between enlightenment and myth, bans from production the negative component of the dialectic of beauty. Which is to say: *the culture industry aborts beauty.*

However, the imaginary nature of the aesthetic is not optional. The culture industry forbids the negative, but it cannot help but produce utopic images. The absolute aesthetic crime of the culture industry is that it peddles positive images as utopia. There is still a utopic image produced—the aesthetic object must produce a utopic image. The culture industry says: "Utopia is here." For this reason, the culture

[36] To my reading of the secondary literature, while much has been made of the political nature of Adorno's aesthetics, not enough has been made of the aesthetic nature of Adorno's politics. Some, Thomas Levin and and John Caughie are notable here, have complicated the old academic orthodoxy that Adorno was simply a cultural curmudgeon. But these thinkers defend Adorno's politics and cultural critiques via a rereading of his cultural writings. I do not think the underlying aesthetic problem, that of the positive/negative image, has been adequately addressed in the conversation. So, while I take my reading of Adorno to be faithful to Adorno and helpful for this conversation, it is more or less original, and I cannot rely on secondary literature for confirmation.

[37] *DE, xviii*

industry's ideology is the "idolization of the existing order."[38] And, because it is precisely this existing order which is given as utopic, the future and the different is forbidden. Hence the famous: "Enlightenment is totalitarian."[39] Thus, the "sameness" referred to by Adorno and Horkheimer throughout *Dialectic of Enlightenment* should not be taken to mean that all products are necessarily "the same." Of course this is not true—the market offers a variegated plethora of products. Not just Volkswagons, but also now electric cars, hummers, and scooters are sold as replacements of the metaphysical. The point is not that these products are the "same" from the standpoint of a marketer. Rather, the point is that the difference preached by a marketer is no real difference at all: it is rather an idolization of the status quo, which is the myth of enlightenment and dominating reason. There are, indeed, false notions of diversity and difference. Without these notions the market could not sustain its status as self-sustainable myth, and the artificial needs peddled by marketers demand these artificial differences. So, the sameness that is produced cannot be in the objects produced. It must instead be in the sociological methods of their production and distribution, and in the impoverished aesthetic sameness constructed in the consumer: the consumer rests still in the false comfort of positive images, and forgets the true anxiety of negative images.[40]

---

[38] ibid

[39] *DE, 4*

[40] If I had the space, I would here explore Foucault's treatment of representational art and the constitution of the "viewer." Foucault's impressive and penetrating essay on Manet, "Manet and the Object of Painting," demonstrates the relationship between objective aesthetic structures and the constitution of aesthetic subjectivity. To the extent that the culture industry idolizes the status quo, it wishes to re-present itself always and forever, and is thus the logical fulfillment of representational art. Following Foucault's work, we would say that this fulfillment of representational art creates a completely immovable and static subject, it creates a place for the subject to gaze.

The constitution of the subject as consumer, then, is required by the culture industry. Nato Thompson, art critic and former curator of MASS MoCA, notes that this constitution is a result of industrial life more generally:

> (The rise of industrial capitalism meant) not just that new products were being produced using new methods—to hear the wailing of coal smelting at the factoris and to conclude that industrialization was changing the world did not require making a huge leap. There were other kinds of changes—the workday, the salary, and the basic relationship of worker and employer—that were also rapidly reshaping daily life. These were as much psychological and existential as they were material. … Industry began to approach production from both ends of the dynamic—it would create a subject who would want what it sold. … The city was a place of looking: looking at strangers, looking at buildings, and looking at objects to consume.[41]

Adorno agrees, and his "Culture industry reconsidered" expresses this agreement. Here, Adorno stresses that, yes, while consumer and marketer are both "in on" the lie that needs are artificial, the consumer is truly deceived insofar as she thinks that the "customer is king." In truth, "the customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object."[42] It is not that marketers sell objects of sameness to consumers. Consumers are those objects of sameness.

What does this consumer look like? The consumer looks like conformity, like sameness. The enlightenment ideals of orderly and ordering reason, in the interest of self-preservation, find a host in consumers. Consumers judge and weigh products, as skeptical, and work as "rationally self-interested" in order to identify and fulfill (artificial) desires. This is how order and reason propagate themselves, and this is how the hegemonic power of dominating reason is strengthened within the confines of the

---

[41] Thompson, Nato. (2015). *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century.* Brooklyn, NY: Melville House. Pg, 5.
[42] *CIR*

culture industry. The culture industry's economy is the status quo, and disorderly disruption—which we Christians hold to be beautiful—is unthinkable:

> The concept of order which (the culture industry) hammers into human beings are always those of the status quo … (The culture industry) proclaims: you shall conform, without instruction as to what; conform to that which exists anyway, and to that which everyone thinks anyway as a reflex of (the culture industry's) power and omnipresence.[43]

And so conformity and sameness as such, a blind structural obedience to the present, is ultimately produced by the culture industry. The ghost of the negative image has been exorcised. The negative is negated, in a way. It is negated insofar as truth itself has been suppressed. Surely this is enough to make us long for the empty, but *true*, promises of beauty!

A Theological Response

In truth, Adorno did not hold that the cultural industry's constituting of subjects was entirely totalizing. As hinted earlier, he held that, ultimately, the promise of art—which is a promise that always fails—escapes complete totalizing. Some recognition of art remains, and so the ghostly negative haunts the shadows, but only barely:

> Only their deep unconscious mistrust, the last residue of the difference between art and empirical reality in the spiritual makeup of the masses explains why they have not, to a person, long since perceived and accepted the world as it is constructed for them by the culture industry.[44]

The claim elicits good feeling, but is rather perplexing. Adorno is not clear about how art is able to escape the culture industry's totalizing. Perhaps he lapses into a sort of

[43] ibid.
[44] ibid.

German idealism—such a critique would not be novel. Perhaps it is mere hope. Speculatively, one could imagine that the culture industry must allow the aesthetic object to remain aesthetic insofar as it commodifies aesthetic objects and not, say, pure tools. That is, in order to sell paintings, the culture industry must still give the painting the freedom to be a painting—even if this freedom is dominated by reason and sold as a cultural commodity. Such a dialectic would be fitting within the greater scheme of enlightenment.

Regardless, this speculation does not need, for us, to find a resolution. Rather than speculate upon the subversive and resistant power of the negative utopic image in the midst of an all-administering culture industry, the sort of theological aesthetics I have been developing holds that the negative image is really and empirically "present" insofar as it is part of the lived experience and shared history of us all: Christ happened. The culture industry is so daunting for Adorno because its idolizing of the status quo seems to squash all hope of the crashing in of the negative. Remember, for Adorno, "second nature" is all there is. The role of aesthetics is to introduce the (always false) promise of first nature, of immediacy and happiness, into second nature. However, the culture industry constructs second nature in such a way that first nature—the truly false promise—is given no way of promising itself. Hence, Adorno is forced into a corner and simply proclaim that there is a difference in the "unconscious" or in the "spiritual" between art and the empirical world. Theology, though, makes a stronger and more material claim: Second nature itself has already been beatified and made witness to beauty. So, the culture industry not only has to compete for domination with art's

powers over the unconscious, but more starkly has to compete with the living negative beauty of Christ.

Christ says no to the culture industry because Christ's beauty, as negating, resists domination: The darkness has not overcome. It is precisely this resisting of domination that allows for participation: because we cannot get on top of this beauty, in order to engage it, we must participate in it. The mode of aesthetic encounter, when it comes to Christ, is participation. We do beauty with Jesus as we do Jesus's beauty. Because this beauty is a *doing* as a negating, it can never be satisfied with re-presenting the status quo. Theological aesthetics completely undermines representational aesthetics, and the structure of the culture industry is to re-present its own sameness ad infinitum.

This tension between beauty and the culture industry has two consequences: On the one hand, the life of faith must resist the ossification and idolization nurtured by the culture industry; on the other hand, life in the culture industry actively resists—stronger, constitutively does not allow for—the negative dialectic of Christ. We are seemingly stuck between an absolute negative beauty and an absolute idol of the present. Thompson, following Adorno, captures the (apparent) inescapability of the situation:

> As the second half of the twentieth century unfolded, an industry of musical and political subcultures brought with it a barrage of potential identifies, and each developed alongside specific micro-economies that were eventually bought and sold into the mainstream. … Today, any culture that sticks around for more than a few months becomes a cultural product—there is nothing outside he culture industry's grasp, no matter how authentic it may seem.[45]

Thompson's text goes on to describe the pervasive intermingling of culture and economy: "creative economies" and "sharing economies" are but ways for the capital-

[45] *SP, 12*

cultural industry to give just enough illusion of difference in order to maintain sameness and an aversion to truth. According to this view, in which the culture industry's idolizing of the status quo is power *par excellence*, the Christian tradition—and the negative theological aesthetics inherent in it—is a subculture ripe for commodification and cooptation. Not only ripe for, but inescapably doomed to. As a subculture and part of second nature—which is, indeed, what I have been arguing—it *will* be coopted by the culture industry. That is, if such cooptation has not already happened. Such is simply the logic of the dominating culture industry.

This, clearly, cannot be our position. While maintaining that the culture industry poses legitimate challenges to participation in beauty—and holding that these challenges have some degree of explanatory value for the current situation—I see beauty as offering at least two strong points of resistance to the culture industry. These points of resistance are beauty's negative and historical components.

In terms of the negativity of beauty, we can simply say that whatever image of God the culture industry constructs in order to commoditize and dominate it, this image cannot be God. Which is as much to say, the beauty presented by marketers, precisely as presented by marketers, cannot be beauty as we call it. Beauty, at least as I have described it here, simply cannot be reduced to commodification or consumption. This is because the negativity of beauty negates the status quo, whatever the status quo is. To present beauty is to get beauty wrong: The culture industry idolizes the status quo. Beauty renounces the status quo. In this way, the culture industry and beauty are antithetical. As soon as beauty is "owned," beauty renounces this particular owned

construction of beauty and calls for more. Beauty is chased after, and in this way calls for participation. Beauty is not dominated. As witnessed in John's prologue and on the Cross, we see that Christ is the epitome of this negation: Christ's beauty absolutely renounces even renunciation itself. When Christ was dominated on the Cross, when Christ was renounced, he forgave. He responded to dominated by renouncing and transfiguring the very category of domination. In this way, we can say that whatever is dominated, this is not God. God is neither dominating nor dominated: there is no darkness here.

If the negativity of beauty forbids the culture industry from commodifying true beauty, the historicism of beauty forbids the culture industry from washing over the category all together. True beauty resists its complete replacement with idols—which is what the culture industry wishes to do. While I have been primarily tuned into the lived, active nature of beauty—we do beauty and in this way keep beauty alive—it is also the case that, as not just revelatory but as reveal*ed*, we remember beauty. We remember that Christ has both promised us beauty and fulfilled this promise with his life. A doing of beauty, then, is both a partaking in and a remembering of this promise. The doing of beauty is an active remembrance.

In thus remembering beauty, we remember both that we can never live up to beauty and that this failure has been forgiven in advance. The promise of beauty is the promise that we will fail, but that beauty will still be—and in Christ has already been—fulfilled. And so the remembrance of beauty is the remembrance both of failure and of forgiveness, of promise and fulfillment. And so the culture industry begins to lose its

idolatrous ground. The culture industry wants to idolatrize the present, which makes it incapable of engaging with memories—especially the absolutely beautiful memory of Christ. We are not merely beings of the eternal, dominated, truthless now—remember, for Adorno, not even those most beguiled by the culture industry actually believe its scheme. Belief is not the economy at work in the culture industry. We are not only present beings, but we are also beings of memory. Through spirit and tradition, through wounds and joys, *through beauty and ugliness*, the memory of Christ—despite the culture industry's efforts—persists. The challenge is to ensure that the content of this memory remains negative, remains beautiful.

These beautiful memories are not abstract intellectualizations. Rather, these memories are manifested in our churches, relationships, faiths, and, in direct confrontation with the culture industry, in our myths. These memories are lived and shared in our doings of beauty. Every beautiful work done in the name of the kingdom is a rejection of the culture industry. This rejection says "no" to the idolatrizing of the status quo in favor of an active remembrance of the past and of an active hope in a more beautiful future. As beauty negates the status quo, it contextualizes and temporalizes it, and this proper contextualization is the death of idols.

In our doings of beauty, then, we participate not only with Christ, but with a whole community. Because Christ's beauty is absolutely negative, it promises that our beatifying cannot be an absolute beatifying. Instead, when we renounce ugliness, there is always more to renounce. In this way, especially understood on the terms of the static and dominating logic of the culture industry, beauty always fails. This promise of failure

creates a common community: all who do beauty experience the coming-short that is constitutive of beauty, and in this sense experience the same community of failure. When we do beauty, we do it with the knowledge not just that we will fail and be forgiven, but that the whole community of beauty-doers has failed and been forgiven before us. We are a community of failures, working in hope. This communal failure—which itself has been beatified—stands as the ultimate renunciation of the culture industry. In its search to dominate and order everything, enlightenment reason is unwilling and unable to accept the possibility of failure. That failure should be both promised and beautiful is absurd to this reason. In a willingness to fail—even a desire to try so hard to beatify that failure is certain—the doer of beauty rejects the underlying logic of the culture industry. She says, "I choose this community, not yours. I choose it not because I dominate it, but precisely because I can't."

And so these two categories—memory and failure—stand as lines in the sand that the culture industry cannot and dares not cross. Revelation, beauty, memory, and failure are part of culture—even though the culture industry wishes this was not so. Against Adorno, then, we do not need to hope in the unconscious rebellion against all second nature and all culture. Instead, we can double down into culture—into the beautiful culture that constantly renounces itself. Which is to say in a more technical way: Because the aesthetic crime of the culture industry is that it replaces the negative utopic image with a false positive utopic image, our response ought be to ensure the survival of the actual negative utopic image: Christ. This commitment to true negativity over false positivity is what will ultimately renounce, and so beatify, the culture

industry. The choice is not between a flight from the world and a submission to the world. The choice, rather, regards what sort of world we wish to build: one of the kingdom, or one of industry. Theologically aesthetically, the choice is clear. To paraphrase Paul de Man, it is better to fail at the beautiful than to succeed at the ugly.

Summary

To summarize, the culture industry does not produce a monotonous and impoverished line of products. It may do this, it may not.[46] It is not primarily concerned with production of products but is concerned with the production of subjects as consumers. Always an aesthetic thinker, even when aesthetic categories are not explicitly at the fore, Adorno ultimately sees the culture industry as committing the mortal sin of replacing art's negative utopic image with mass culture's positive utopic image. For Adorno, there is hope that art somehow—in the subconscious or spirit—resists this positivizing. For theological aesthetics, though, the culture industry cannot merely wash away the negative utopic image, because the negative utopic image has happened and has real, material, relational life. Not reliant upon the utopic ghosts of Adorno, theological aesthetics can double down into its own absolute negativity and renounce the domination of the culture industry. This renouncing is done through the active remembrance of beauty in and by the community of beautifiers.

[46] Much has been made of the alleged "democratizing of culture" that comes about from the culture industry. This reading holds that the culture industry produces culture for the masses, and in this way is democratic. No. The culture industry creates the masses itself, and in this way is totalitarian.

The aesthetic path is now clear enough to more directly address the situation of Palestinian oppression. I have sought so far to provide a critical aesthetics. This critical aesthetics understands that beauty must be done, but also understands that there are obstacles to this doing. This discussion of the culture industry named and renounced one such obstacle, perhaps the chief obstacle. In this process of renouncing, beauty itself was found to be the answer: we turned to the promise of beauty in order to overcome totalitarian industry. Here we saw that the solution was not to run and hide from culture, but to beatify it. We still do not "have" beauty, but it is precisely our inability to "have" or dominate beauty that allowed us to resist the culture industry. Such is the dialectic. Now, turning to Palestine, we can apply these insights in a similarly dialectical way. I will begin with a discussion of suicide bombing. Ultimately I will argue that suicide bombing is a renunciation of ugliness that is not itself beautiful. This will challenge and probe our conceptions of renunciation and negativity. Then, ending with what is most fundamental, I will take seriously Naim Ateek's charge that the occupation has called God's character into question. I will suggest that this has been done aesthetically in that occupation posits a representational God of the culture industry.

Part Three: Towards a Theological Aesthetics of Palestinian Liberation

Beauty in the Dregs: Suicide Bombing as Aesthetic Extremity

The scope of the Israeli occupation of Palestine is large and deep. It is too large and too deep to treat systematically. For launching this aesthetic analysis of oppression there are, of course, many possible points of departure. A profanely historical survey of the occupation might be useful insofar as it could give content to the historical component of beauty and ugliness. Regardless, historical surveys have been done, and have been done well—especially by the aforementioned Illan Pappé.[47] Scanning the academic and popular literature suggests other, perhaps more nuanced, approaches. One can approach occupation from the perspective of a post-colonial theorist, but here I have little to add to the work of Edward Said.[48] Theologically, one can approach from the standpoint of the Palestinian liberation theology developed by Naim Ateek. I will rely on Ateek's work, and take his thought as informative.[49] But Ateek's commitments to biblical hermeneutics are not the same aesthetic commitments I have developed—although the dialectic of beauty has some resonance with Ateek's notion of an advancing understanding of God. And so, my methodological point of departure is the critical theological aesthetic I have so far developed.

---

[47] Especially *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples* (2006) and *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2007).
[48] Especially *The Question of Palestine* (1992) and *Palestine* (2001).
[49] My reading of Ateek primarily makes us of his *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (1989), *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* (2008), and "What is theologically and morally wrong with suicide bombing?" (2003).

But to what should this method be applied? To speak of "occupation" is already to give in to certain metaphors, presuppositions, and political commitments. What, exactly, is "occupation?" I suggest that, at its core, occupation is an aesthetic phenomenon. Occupation is the walls, borders, checkpoints, dirt, and grime imposed by occupiers. It is also the fighting for freedom, renouncing of the status quo, and beautifying of the resisting occupied. This text has sought to bring such material, historical realities into theological aesthetic conversation. *At its core, I have argued, theological aesthetics is about relationship with a personal and fleshly God-who-is-beauty, and the dialectical, negative, and beatifying engagement with the world that this relationship requires.* This is how I will approach the injustice of Palestinian oppression. I take Chomsky seriously when he says that we need to change American public policy. However, I see little chance of doing so by way of arguing the demerits of occupation in the abstract: From its original sin of indigenous genocide up through the current day, America is a nation built of and on occupation. In the words of H. Rap Brown, "Violence is as American as cherry pie." Which is to say, talking about colonialism and occupation to colonists and occupiers seems like a battle for which we do not have time.[50] And so, I start not structurally but in the extremes of materiality: suicide bombing.

Suicide bombing was most predominant as a feature of resistance during the period known as the Second Intifada. Precise dates are disputed and unimportant, but

[50] This battle is a worthwhile one, and I applaud the efforts of those theorists who theorize in order to liberate. But I, for one, admit feeling a certain disgust at the discrepancy in gravity between the theory of journals and the situation of the occupation, and of the bomber. I hope to avoid this discrepancy the best I can.

the Second Intifada lasted roughly from September 2000, when Ariel Sharon made a provocative and aggressive visit to Temple Mount in Old City Jerusalem, to February 2005, when President Abbas and Sharon agreed to the Sharm el-Sheikh Summit agreement, which promised an end to Israeli military activity against Palestinians. Between 2000 and 2005, there were 241 suicide attacks done by Palestinians. By way of comparison, between 1980 and 2005, there were 23 attacks. Since 2005, there have been seven. Since 2008, there has been only one: In 2015, a Palestinian woman exploded a bomb in her car after she was stopped by Israeli traffic police on her way to Jerusalem. She was the only fatality.[51] That the frequency of suicide bombings has decreased is perhaps revealing of the changing nature of the occupation. This will be discussed in due time. And despite the fact that suicide bombing is no longer a predominant tool of resistance—which is always the same as saying, it is no longer a predominant means of occupation—I believe that the sheer and deep ugliness of this particular act demonstrates, in a marked and moving way, the terror of the Israeli occupation of Palestine.[52] The ugliness of the act compels a look. On a simply strategic

[51] These statistics have been compiled from Johnston's Archive (http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/terrorism/), Jewish Virtual Library (http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:y5OC-NQXRjsJ:www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Terrorism/victims.html+%22french+hill%22+junction+terrorist&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=13), and Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/terrorism/palestinian/pages/suicide%20and%20other%20bombing%20attacks%20in%20israel%20since.aspx)

[52] Lately, heartbreakingly, there has been an increase—not a decrease—in suicide bombings outside of Israel/Palestine. These suicide bombings, which have attacked the west, France and Belgium, and the Middle East, Turkey and Beirut, alike demand a different aesthetic analysis. The relationship here between occupied and occupier is not, to me, clear at all. I suspect it is not clear to the bombers, either. The fact that these attacks are done alongside of shootings and other means of murder also demands a different aesthetics—this will become more clear as my analysis of the fleshly nature of suicide bombings plays out. Regardless, I am concerned here with Palestine. But these recent events are on my mind, cannot be totally compartmentalized, and are thus present.

level, the existence of suicide bombing is often used as an apology for occupation: "These people kill the innocent, they must be occupied." So, true to the spirit of Adornian dialectical and immanent criticism, we will overcome this apologetic claim by going through it. If suicide bombing is held as the grounds of occupation, then these grounds should be shaken. Before aesthetically shaking these grounds, it will be worth briefly interrogating the merits of treating suicide bombing as an aesthetic phenomenon. The matter is a somber one. While I hold that aesthetics has great political and ethical value, and have sought to demonstrate this throughout the text, I recognize that treating something as serious and somber as suicide bombing on an aesthetic level can appear either offensively detached or arrogantly erudite. Can aesthetics be done on the level of suicide bombing?

I say suicide bombing resides in the extremes of materiality because suicide bombing is that phenomenon wherein persons use, abuse, and sacrifice their materiality in order to annihilate the materiality of themselves and others. Murder by gun uses matter to kill (the matter of the gun and bullet), but that matter is not person, not flesh. Murder by suicide, though, makes the place and matter that is person into a site of destructive resistance: the matter who is the bomber is converted from person to weapon—the aesthetics of the bomber are irrevocably changed, the body ends as weapon, changed from "whom" to "that." The suicide bomber does not throw an explosive at his victims. No, the suicide bomber wants his body to be explosive and exploded. Suicide bombing is a self-hatred and hatred of the other up to the level of constitution: of flesh. It is also a hatred, then, of a relationship: suicide bombing is a

hatred of the ugly relationship between occupier and occupied—it hates this relationship so much that it seeks to kill both parties. If theological aesthetics is serious in its claim that absolute beauty is absolutely personal, material, and grounded in relationship, then this complete annihilation of personal matter and right relationship must be aesthetically critiqued.

The choice to begin with an extreme event is an aesthetic choice in another sense, too. As noted, the culture industry, and the enlightenment ideology that undergirds it, thrives on sameness. Typically, this sameness is euphemistically given over as the virtue of "moderation."[53] The culture industry says, "Dream not too big, stray not too far, ask not too much—moderation is key." But the critical aesthetics of beauty forbids this approach. Beauty thrives in the margins—if we take Adorno's schema, then the role of beauty is precisely to create the margins: Beauty says ugliness is here, and utopia, unreachable, there. To live in sameness and moderation, then, is to cower from the marginalizing work of doing beauty. This cowering, of course, is simply a choice to live in and re-produce ugliness: beauty has already been revealed, and searching for static safety in the middle ground is itself a rejection of beauty's urgent call forward. Christ's promise was not moderation, but fulfillment. Christ's beauty does not maintain, it negates. By bringing up suicide bombing, then, this aesthetics hopes to confront the culture industry—and other comfortable industries and cultures of oppression—with an ugly extremity of its own making. In this way, simply performing an aesthetics of an extreme act will help undermine the ugliness produced by the occupation.

[53] That modern philosophy has made a virtue of moderation is not a novel insight. The alleged virtuousness of moderation has arisen out of a tradition older and deeper than the Enlightenment.

Finally, and confessionally, I admit that the terror of suicide bombing brings upon me a decidedly aesthetic state. Metaphysics loses whatever luster is left. Upon hearing the news of an attack, I hope that friends and loved ones in the area are okay. I am saddened that the world looks like this, feels like this. Theodicy is forgotten and is replaced by a tickle in the throat. Ethics, I suppose, is present, but only as absent, as a question. Images of suicide bombing are images of grey and black, of running children and abandoned cafes. Familiar streets become uncanny. The world is not the world I thought I knew, but is more dangerous, it has more blown out walls, more crying kids. But even to speak of knowing seems alien—I've never pondered questions of epistemology after an attack; so not unknown, just uncanny. Unsettling, cold or hot or whatever. So I retreat to friends, family, my dog, Hemingway, a cup of coffee. I remember the strawberry and milk scene from Bergman's "The Seventh Seal," and like Block, I try to remember an "hour of peace: the strawberries, the bowl of milk, your faces in the dusk. Mikael asleep, Jof with his lute." I wish to reclaim the matter and stuff and relationships of the world as good. This is an aesthetic place.

Not only can aesthetics treat suicide bombing, then, but it ought to.

A Renunciation of Occupation

The aesthetics of suicide bombing hinges, as all aesthetics, on renunciation. To situate this analysis, it will be fruitful to recall in rough the three aesthetic structures I have presented in this text. First, Adorno's negative aesthetics posits that beauty is

always negative; that is, utopia is not-here, and never will be. The beautiful in this aesthetics renounces second nature and offers a false promise of happiness—false, because the promised happiness is always not-here. Against Adorno, the aesthetics of the culture industry says that utopia *is* here, and any change from the status quo is ugly. Against both, a critical theological aesthetics says that beauty is negative because the status quo is not enough. Thus, rather than posit an always not-here utopia, theological aesthetics affirms that utopia is revealed and calls for participation. This participation is never enough—*we* never create utopia. Yet, we hope. Beauty is not-yet-here. Each of these aesthetics is grounded in renunciation, but the contours of renunciation are different for each. For Adorno, renunciation is responsible for the co-constitution of beauty and ugliness: beauty's renouncing is cruel. For the culture industry, renunciation maintains the status quo: all that is not (false) utopic sameness is renounced, and so renunciation preserves (false) beauty. For theological aesthetics, renunciation must, in the final analysis, renounce itself. Renunciation cannot be cruel to the ugly, but must forgive and love that which it renounces. Renunciation is beatified.

What, then, is suicide bombing—as aesthetic act—renouncing? What type of renunciation is suicide bombing doing? Surely it is a renouncing of ugliness. Naim Ateek's 2003 essay "What is theologically and morally wrong with suicide bombing?", which is a careful and nuanced "attempt to understand but not justify" suicide bombing, makes this case.[54] In it, Ateek argues that suicide bombing is, indisputably, a response to

[54] Ateek, Naim. "Suicide Bombers: What is Theologically and Morally Wrong with Suicide Bombings?" Studies in World Christianity. 8.1(2002): 5-30

occupation. "No one," Ateek reminds us, "is born a terrorist."[55] Instead, suicide bombers are born in the "image and likeness of God." [56] Their victims, too, of course, share in the image of God. In characteristic directness, Ateek captures the gravity of this situation:

> When healthy, beautiful, and intelligent young men and women set out to kill and be killed, something is basically wrong in a world that has not heard their anguished cry for justice. These young people deserve to live along with all those whom they have caused to die.[57]

Here "beautiful" refers to the *Imago Dei*, and nothing else. Surely, the act of suicide bombing is not beautiful, and so if we are what we do, then these people are not beautiful. In this way, Ateek relies upon a type of transcendental aesthetic anthropology: there is some part of the person—the beautiful part, that part which is the image of God—that escapes ugliness and the affairs of the world. This is not the sort of beauty I have been after. In this passage, beauty behaves as predicate and, as is typical for theological aesthetics, as a transcendental. It is a faith claim. This is fine, perhaps unavoidable, but I want beauty to be verb, not property. Regardless, Ateek's greater point is unobjectionable, and can be translated into a more critical aesthetics as the following: "People setting out to kill and be killed points to an ugly world, and makes it uglier. These people deserve beauty, as do we all."

This minor disagreement over Ateek's particular deployment of the category of beauty is not an indictment on his work. As the title of the essay says, he is interested primarily in morality, not aesthetics. Continuing along moral lines, now laced with a more overtly theological bent, Ateek notes that suicide bombings are done from a place

[55] While not his primary concern, Ateek is also quick to note that the very name "terrorist" is a construction of the occupier. In the final analysis, Ateek agrees with Brian Whitaker: **"**Terrorism is violence committed by those we disapprove of."
[56] ibid.
[57] ibid

of total despair. This category of despair, for Ateek, is essential for any understanding of suicide bombing.[58] The story of one suicide bomber, Abdel Odeh, is taken as illustrative:

> Odeh was prevented by the Israeli authorities from crossing into Jordan to get married to his fiancée from Baghdad. The Israeli Shin Bet (security intelligence) kept sending after him. He refused to go because he suspected, as often happens, that they would blackmail and pressure him into becoming an informer. He was 25 years old, ready to get married, start a family, settle in Jordan, and enjoy life. When everything was shut in his face and his future plans were shattered by the Israeli army, he turned to suicide bombing. His father attributed his son's action to humiliation and a broken heart. His family first heard about the bombing from the TV … Such stories abound in the Palestinian community.[59]

Abdel's story, and others like it, show the ways in which Palestinian subjectivity is constructed as despairing. The occupation creates an environment where despair is the norm—the occupied do not despair *for* something, but are constructed as despairing, as dehumanized. Ateek identifies four primary contributing factors to Palestinian despair: (1) *Unemployment and impoverishment* create suffocating conditions; (2) *Checkpoints* are institutions of humiliation that require Palestinians to perform their own degradation; (3) *Prisons* detain Palestinians for indefinite periods of time; often until they agree to become spies, which breeds self-hatred; (4) Nearly all *families* in Palestine have experienced pain and loss at the hands of the Israeli military—the scope of the occupation's violence is wide. Notably, all four of these factors deal with material and relational instantiations of occupation. For Ateek, these four factors create the conditions for despair. This despair allows for the disregard for life necessary for suicide bombing: suicide bombing is not primarily an angry act, but a despairing one.

---

[58] Ateek is firm that suicide bombing is the result of despair: "There were no suicide bombings before the Oslo Peace Process. It is the result of despair and hopelessness that started to set in when an increasing number of Palestinians became frustrated by the deepening Israeli oppression and humiliation." Again: "And as (Palestinians) were driven deeper into despair, their desire to hit back in any way possible grew in intensity."

[59] ibid.

Taken together, these factors demonstrate the ways in which the occupation works on the level of the aesthetic. With the concepts of materiality and relationality, and the framework of critical aesthetics, we can begin to think despair aesthetically. These concepts interconnect.

Materiality and Relationality

God became flesh, and Christ beatified matter. The kingdom is not just a spiritual one. These, I take it, are core truths of the aesthetic I have been developing. In our quest to constantly beatify, we must constantly negate instances of ugly materiality. The institution of the checkpoint is just one instance of occupation creating a materially ugly world: There are no checkpoints in heaven. The ugliness of checkpoints refers not so much to the architecture of the checkpoints—although, daunting and dim as they are, this is important—but to the fact that checkpoints, along with the barrier wall, contribute to the occupation notion that matter itself is oppressive. The depth of the ugliness of a checkpoint can best be seen when contrasted with a home, a place of protection and love. Reworking Hegel's famous meditation on home construction shows this ugliness. Homes, Hegel teaches, are built using the laws of nature and the stuff of nature in order to restrain nature:

> So also when someone starts building a house, his decision to do so is freely made. But all the elements must help. And yet the house is being built to protect man against the elements. Hence the elements are here used against themselves. But the general law of nature is not disturbed thereby. … The result is that the wind, which has helped to build the house, is shut out by the house; so also are the violence of rains and floods and the destructive powers of fire, so far as the house is made fire-proof. The stones and beams obey the law of gravity and press

> downwards so that the high walls are held up. Thus the elements are made use of in accordance with their nature and cooperate for a product by which they become constrained.

And so a home is an exercise in cooperation between a builder and nature. Nature is cooperative, and matter is protective. To some extent, matter is even sacrificial: matter undermines itself, keeps itself out, in order to protect the builder, the home-dweller.

But this is not the relationship between matter and a checkpoint. In a checkpoint, matter is used not to protect but to keep-out. The checkpoint forces the Palestinian to submit to the will of the Israeli. Here, at the checkpoint, the aesthetics are that of the butcher's corral: bodies are pushed this way, flopped that way, stripped over here, tossed over there. The checkpoint, as Ateek notes, is "clearly a policy that strips people of their self worth and dignity."[60] But the checkpoint is not just a policy; it is also a place and a site built of matter. And, as Ateek also notes, it is a site that is often "arbitrarily mounted at whim." In this way, the checkpoint is a site of construction—quite literally construction, gates and walls and fences and blocks and turrets—that dehumanizes. Matter, allied with occupation, becomes dehumanizing. Matter turns the human into matter. It is thus no mystery that the suicide bomber thinks of himself as a "that" instead of a "who." This is why Ateek says about those who become suicide bombers, "if Israel labels them as terrorists, they are, after all the product of its own making."[61] Those on the ugly side of the checkpoint see the matter of nature used to aid their oppression and occupation. Their occupation depends on stuff, material stuff. Matter, from this standpoint, is oppressive.

[60] ibid.
[61] ibid.

This ugliness of matter finds its fulfillment in the reduction of the person to weapon. Previously, I spoke of suicide bombing as a transformation of matter from flesh to weapon. Suicide bombing reduces the person from a "who" to a "that." However, this brief meditation on occupation has shown that the who-ness and flesh of the bomber has been reduced from the beginning. As Ateek says, "It was in the crucible of the occupation that they were shaped and formed."[62] The suicide bomber does not do ugliness by reducing his flesh to weapon, because it has always been reduced. Put otherwise, the aesthetic crime of suicide bombing cannot be the reduction of flesh to weapon: this is precisely the crime of the occupier. In Ateek's framework, suicide bombing, then, is a response to this occupation of the flesh. Palestinian flesh is made ugly by occupation and made a weapon, a "terrorist," by the checkpoint.

When initially contrasting a theological aesthetics with the critical aesthetics developed by Adorno, I found the category of relationality to be essential. Adorno sees the aesthetic encounter as one of finitude and, ultimately, mortality: because beauty is absolutely negative, I, the aesthetic subject, encounter my limits in the encounter with beauty. Against this view, I held that Christ, a person, offered a different kind of aesthetic encounter. In this personal encounter we find not a limit but relationship—we find expansion and promise, not finitude and mortality. This places the category of relationality in a firmly aesthetic register. Beauty is relational. However, if occupation fundamentally changes the contours of this category of relationship, then we risk losing

[62] ibid.

the promise of beauty. That is, if relationships themselves are ugly, then the promise of relationship offers no way out of Adorno's enigma. This, it seems, is precisely what happens in occupation.

Ateek says that there is "hardly any Palestinian family in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip that has not experienced some kind of pain or injury." Statistics are hard to find, fiercely disputed, and perhaps beside the point. Nonetheless, the statistics that are available are daunting. There are more than 4.5 million Palestinian refugees worldwide. The current population of the Palestinian territories is also, roughly, 4.5 million. A Palestinian today is just as likely to be a refugee as she is to live in Palestine. During the Second Intifada, it is estimated that 4,800 Palestinians were killed. Another 2,000 were killed during the First Intifada, which is known as the peaceful intifada. The 1982 Lebanon War, Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon, resulted in up to 20,000 Palestinian deaths. The wars are never ending. Israel calls its intrusions into Gaza "mowing the lawn."[63] The frequency of violence has made violence the norm. Speaking to the heartbreak of this norm, Chomsky notes that "Israel killed, on average, more than two Palestinian children a week for the past 14 years."[64] On average—times of "peace" and times of open slaughter—two children are killed a week. To live in Palestine is to live familiarly with death.

But these statistics simply confirm what the fact of suicide bombing suggests: there is despair. Such a constant threat of death necessarily changes one's

[63] Chomsky, N. (2014). "Ceasefires in Which Violations Never Cease." Retrieved from: http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175892/
[64] ibid.

understanding of relationship. The aesthetics I have developed is grounded on the notion that relationality is expansive and promising: Christ is the promise that brings us past the limit. In Palestine, though, relationships often bring the promise of more despair. These relationships of despair are illustrated, literally, in Palestinian street art.

The aesthetic presence of death is ubiquitous in Gaza. Journalist Eóin Murray describes this presence:

> The street art here in Gaza focuses primarily on the human element of loss. On every street corner, in almost every shop (sometimes because they want to, sometimes because of social and political pressure) there are photographs and paintings of the dead, mostly young men but also women and children - people who have been killed by the Israeli army. … The street art celebrates the faces of martyrs and largely it is a simple form of painting, almost in pre-renaissance style with little attention paid to perspective or to any sense of a de Vinci-esque homage to human detail. They usurp symbols such as the dove or flowers - showing them as they wither away under the occupation. The collective suffering of the people is emphasised by the huddled crowds which appear on this and other murals. Of course, this is in stark contrast to the immediate sense of the individual one absorbs from the murals of the 'martyrs'. These individuals faced their death alone and are celebrated alone, on large murals, or small posters, with a background of flowers and weaponry. Guns 'n' Roses.[65]

Paying homage to the martyr, the audience is forming a relationship to death-as-image. Here, Adorno is helpful.[66]. These murals are the false promise of Adorno's aesthetics taken to the extreme. For Adorno, art still offered happiness. The Adornian artwork lied to the audience, and falsely promised utopia. But it undoubtedly *offered* utopia. In approaching beauty, for Adorno, the viewer eventually comes to terms with the nature of beauty's lie and discovers that she is unable to shake off second nature, she is unable to grasp first nature, beauty, happiness. But art's promise, albeit a known lie, is still there, and she can enjoy this promise and perhaps use this negative promise to question

[65] Murray, E. (2005). "The Art of War." The Electronic Intifada. Retrieved from: https://electronicintifada.net/content/art-war/5418

[66] See, for instance, McDonald, David "Poetics and the Performance of Violence in Israel/Palestine." Ethnomusicology. 53.1 (2009): 59-82

her surroundings: “this artwork promises happiness, my society does not, and so I can negate my society.” These murals, though, operating with more of a realist aesthetic than Adorno’s ghostly utopia, are blunt: “There is no utopia, let’s skip the happiness, let’s get to the meat of the matter: this is the limit, this society is unhappy, there is no way out.” In occupation, the aesthetic object becomes an image not of utopia, but of death itself. This image is negative, sure, but it is not the type of negative image that can dialectically negate and beatify the status quo. Instead, the mural of the martyr infuses more death into the status-quo. The status quo is death, and these murals re-present it. The viewer’s relationship to the aesthetic image is one of despair, of sameness, of death.

All of which is to say: occupation occupies relationships. Familial relations are not stable, for death could come at any moment—indeed, has likely come already. In this way, occupation haunts the family: there are only occupied families. The nation is, quite literally and in more ways than one, split. One’s relationship to her nation, then, is a relationship to an occupied and fractured state; it is an occupied and fractured relationship. Relationships to aesthetic objects are not relationships to personal beauty, but are relationships to the opposite of living and personal beauty: they are relationships to death. The most stable relationship the occupied has is with her occupier—given the apparent omnipotence of the occupier, this is the only relationship that promises to stay. It is thus no mystery that the Palestinian suicide bomber offers death to the Israeli, for it is death that the Israeli offers to the Palestinian suicide bomber.

An Ugly Renunciation

And so suicide bombing is a response to the ugliness of occupation. Those born into occupation are named ugly from birth. "It was in the crucible of the occupation that they were shaped and formed."[67] And so, the ugliness is twofold: Occupation is an ugliness that names the occupied ugly. Here Adorno's critique is again illuminative. Occupation names its victims ugly, and in a way most cruel. This, surely, needs renunciation. And this renunciation is the truth content of suicide bombing. Any properly dialectical critique of suicide bombing must affirm, not gloss over, this terrible truth content.

But suicide bombing loses this truth content in its deployment of and commitment to ugliness. As a response to occupation, suicide bombing is a re-presentation of occupation. Suicide bombing does, of course, renounce occupation: Palestinian suicide bombers act from a deep hatred of their occupiers. But suicide bombing also participates in the double-ugly structure of occupation: suicide bombing is an ugliness that promulgates the ugliness it wishes to renounce. This was shown in the discussions of materiality and relationality. Occupation shapes matter in an oppressive way, and suicide bombing uses matter in an oppressive way. Occupation teaches that all relationships are haunted by death, and suicide bombing injects death into the most despairingly stable relationship of occupation. In these ways, suicide bombing is a

[67] *Suicide Bombing*

reiteration of the logic of oppression. It negates nothing, but instead re-presents the status quo. To say that occupation creates suicide bombers is more than psychologizing. No, it is the claim that "the crucible of occupation" has "shaped and formed" these people in such a way that matter itself *is* a weapon and that to be in a relationship *is* to engage and employ, if not aesthetically admire, death and finitude. In a suicide bomber, we see the ugliness of occupation. And so, any critique of suicide bombing must also be a critique of occupation.

At the same time, an honest phenomenology admits that the ugliness of suicide bombing is different than the ugliness of occupation. That suicide bombing is given as ugly is not a claim that requires much argument. It should be enough to say that as an ugly response to ugliness, suicide bombing seems somehow further from beauty. Born from despair, it is an ugliness that beclouds promise: the bomber is more interested in death than either beatification or forgiveness. Visceral, it is an ugliness that catches the throat and wells the eye: it saddens and scares more than enrages. The suicide bomber is both victim and perpetrator, so these easy categories of ordering reason, and the easy aesthetic contrast between the beautiful and the ugly, are threatened. We proclaim that God has become flesh, but here flesh becomes dangerous, evil, and ugly. Our neighbors become aesthetic questions: what is this matter? –a person? –or is this a weapon? Creation becomes weaponized—malls, theaters, metros, and airports are all sites marked by the ugly trace of suicide bombing. In all, suicide bombing forces the despair of the occupied onto the cruel comfort of the occupiers. In a way, this force disrupts the status quo of occupation. But it is a disruption that uses ugliness to renounce ugliness.

And so, the situation is worse than bleak. For Ateek, suicide bombing must be condemned because it is a disregard for the value of life. This disregard works from both ends: the Israeli disregards the Palestinian, and the Palestinian bomber disregards the Israeli. For critical aesthetics, suicide bombing must be condemned because it is a promulgation of ugliness. This promulgation works from both ends: the Israeli creates ugly matter and relationships, and the Palestinian bomber affirms the ugliness of these things through suicide bombing. There is no dialectic, no negativity, and thus no beauty. We seem trapped. How can beauty promise change where ugliness begets itself?

Yet, Ateek, for one, at least in 2003 at the time of the essay, remains hopeful:

> All peace-loving people, whether people of faith or not, must exert greater concerted effort to work for the ending of the occupation. Ultimately, justice will prevail, the occupation will be over, and the Palestinians, as well as the Israelis, will enjoy freedom and independence. How do I know that this will take place? I know because I believe in God.[68]

Despite Chomsky's dire concern, and despite the horror and heartbreak of Israel's most recent episode of "mowing the lawn," there may be reason to share Ateek's hope.[69] If Ateek is right that suicide bombing is a result of despair, then the decreased frequency of suicide attacks may be a sign of hope among the Palestinians. If my aesthetic analysis is right that suicide bombing is an internalizing and expressing of a reduction of the flesh

[68] ibid.

[69] Israel's 2014 "Operation Protective Edge," which is an English translation designed to convey defensiveness and innocence and is more literally translated as "Operation Strong Cliff," was a performance of war crimes widely renounced by international legal and faith communities. Succumbing to tears, UNRWA spokesperson Chris Gunness summarized the operation: "What is happening in Gaza, particularly to the children, is an affront to the humanity of all of us." Gunness's work is important, laudable, and saintly. These particular words are moving, prophetic, and beautiful. They can be accessed here: www.theguardian.com%2Fworld%2Fvideo%2F2014%2Fjul%2F31%2Fun-spokesman-chris-gunness-breaks-down-during-aljazeera-interview-video&usg=AFQjCNEPR_ePWTUeOuhuf4AhGKglXqdnuw

to weapon and an acceptance of the finitude of relationship, then the decreased frequency of attacks may be a sign of the return of the flesh and a righting of relationship. The Netanyahu regime and the Israel lobby have credited the construction of security fences with deterring bombers.[70] But this claim does not hold up to scrutiny: there has still been violence. Indeed, there has been talk of a Third Intifada, the "Knife Intifada," or "Lone Wolf Intifada."[71] No, violence has not stemmed. Violence has changed. Suicide bombers now kill with a knife instead of with their bodies. This is still deplorable, but it is different. Without valorizing these knife attacks, we can say: "Thankfully, we no longer see suicide bombings in Palestine/Israel." We hope that these bombings do not return. We also hope that their absence is a sign of diminishing despair; that is, of hope. Perhaps there are no longer suicide bombers because there are no longer Palestinians who have internalized the dehumanization dished out by the programs of Israeli occupation. This, of course, is not enough. In the final analysis, hope—which is constitutive of beauty-as-promise—does not come from a knife. All violence, all occupation, all renunciation must be renounced. The darkness cannot overcome the light.

[70] Bard, M. (2016). "West Bank Security Fence." Jewish Virtual Library. Retrieved from: https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Peace/fence.html

[71] Reports by the United Nations confirm that violence, from both sides, has not been slowed by a wall. See: http://www.ochaopt.org/poc16february-22february-2016.aspx

Conclusion: Conversion or Displacement?

The aesthetics of suicide bombing, then, marks an aesthetics of a particular moment of the occupation of Palestine. The moment is one of despair, and shows how the occupation works on an aesthetic—which here means relational and material—level. The moment of suicide bombing has passed, but the occupation has continued. If anything, the occupation—feeling pressure now more than ever from the international community—has ossified. Naim Ateek's second major work, *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation*, was published in 2008, after the Second Intifada and the bulk of suicide bombing. In it, Ateek articulates other moments of occupation: he devotes chapters to the land, to Zionism, to Jerusalem, to Israel, to the so-called two state solution, and to various biblical stories and themes (Jonah, Samson, the suffering servant contrasted to the Son of David, among others). For reasons mentioned above, I chose to dedicate a large section of this text to an aesthetic analysis of suicide bombing. However, now that the skeleton of a critical theological aesthetics has more or less come together, it would be fruitful to perform similar analyses for these other moments and articulations of occupation. For example, the political ideology of Zionism employs and relies on a thoroughly representational aesthetics: It not only represents God, but more subtly perversely Zionism creates a God who desires a representational earth: Zionism says, "Israel stands here, God stands here, you, the viewer, you, the Palestinian, stand there. *Do not move.*" This inelasticity runs totally contrary to all sense of negative aesthetics that I have tried to develop, because a truly negative conception of beauty admits that there is not a "place" for Israel in the kingdom, because *all* places—and people—must

be overcome, *dis*placed, renounced, and beatified. The work of beauty is not to preserve Israel, but to beatify it: precisely this is to tear down its walls; precisely this is to tear down its Zionism. If Zionism wants beauty, it must renounce itself.

Given time and space, I hope to pursue these critical analyses of moments of occupation. Even when these moments pass, their analyses reveal the ugliness of occupation. Because we *are* fleshly, relational, hopeful, and memorial, occupation, even when it no longer produces these particular moments, will always be marked by the ugliness of these moments. As said, human flesh and communal spaces such as malls and airports are now marked by the trace of suicide bombing. Our goal is to heal this flesh and these spaces. Occupation's flesh wears the pox of its history, and we will always hope to beatify it.

Because I do not have the time in this text to pursue in full this research project—which is performing a critical theological aesthetics of Naim Ateek's Palestinian liberation theology—I will turn, in conclusion, to Ateek's own summary of his work. While discussing the role of the bible for Palestinian theology, Ateek keenly notes that, "God's character is at stake. God's integrity has been called into question."[72] Tucked into the middle of *Justice and Only Justice*, Ateek's first major work, this statement grasps, in a direct way, the essential battleground for both liberation theology and theological aesthetics; indeed, for theology. For Ateek, God's character has been "questioned," a euphemism for tarnished, by the supplanting of "spiritual Israel" with the current political state Israel:

[72] Ateek, N. (1989). *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation.*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. pg 78.

> (The) traditional spiritual connotation of the name "Israel" has been supplanted today by a political and military connotation. Today, if I go to church and try to join in the singing of the Psalms, I am pulled up short, with a jar, when the name "Israel" comes to my lips. The name conjures up today a picture of a small, middle-Europe type state. … The present-day political Israel has, for all of us, obliterated or, at least, adumbrated, the spiritual Israel of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is surely a tragedy.[73]

For Ateek, the existence of the current, oppressive nation state Israel forces us to ask who God is. Is *this* the place that God has chosen, and these occupiers God's elect? What demands does this election place on Israel, on Israelis? In what way can we even speak of the current Israel as existing as referent to the sign "Israel" in the Hebrew bible? Is God inclusive, or exclusive? Ultimately, is the God of Christ also the God of Israel-as-occupier? For Ateek, these questions have clear answers. These answers are given to us through the life of Christ and the testimony of scripture:

> Palestinian Christians are looking for a hermeneutic that will help them to identify the authentic Word of God in the Bible to discern the true meaning of those biblical texts that Jewish Zionists and Christian fundamentalists cite to substantiate their subjective claims and prejudices. … The canon of this hermeneutic for the Palestinian Christian is nothing less than Jesus Christ himself. … Jesus the Christ thus becomes—in himself and in his teaching—the true hermeneutic, the key to the understanding of the Bible, and beyond the Bible to the understanding of the action of God throughout history. The *Word* of God incarnate in Jesus the Christ interprets for us the *word* of God in the Bible.[74]

Following Ateek following Christ, theological aesthetics, as developed so far, has been forced to ask questions about God's character in its own ways. Is the beauty of God merely transcendent, or negatively dialectical? Is this beauty spiritualized, or is it enfleshed? Does God endorse the status quo, or does God demand negation? Is relationship ultimately relationship with death, or does God offer personal and expansive relationship with God's self? Does beauty offer a false promise, or has utopia been revealed? Does God re-present sameness, or does God beatify? What sort of

[73] Ibid.
[74] ibid.

kingdom are we called to build? God's character, it seems, is crucial to aesthetics. And yet, a simple look around—and here I really mean a *look*—shows that the common aesthetics of today, which are the aesthetics of occupation, are not the critical aesthetics proper to God's beauty. The occupation of Palestine exists, Israel "mows the lawn," and so we must have the character of God wrong.

I hold that, for us in the west, the fundamental stumbling block to our "getting God's character right," is our involvement with and endorsement of the culture industry. The middle part of this text elaborated the ways in which the aesthetics of the culture industry prevent critical participation with the beauty of God. This is because the culture industry has made an idol of the status quo, and has done so by constituting western subjectivity as consumerist. This idolatrizing of the status quo is troubling from two ends: First, most obviously, the status quo is unsustainable and ugly. In the status quo, the Palestinians are occupied. In the status quo, we Americans subsidize the Israeli occupation via military "aid" and political protection. If this is what the culture industry wishes to maintain, then clearly we cannot maintain the culture industry. On a more fundamental level, the culture industry has created not participators, but consumers. We do not participate in the creation of culture, we consume culture. It is for this reason that the culture industry more or less permits apparent counter-cultural movements to arise: as Nato Thompson so tragically reminded us, these, too, will be consumed, and sameness will triumph. In the same way, it seems, the culture industry is not interested in subjects who participate with God in the building of the kingdom. Rather, the consumer industry is interested in subjects who *consume God.* Consumers of God take

God in as object, as product, as commodity. God is placed within a systematic economy of sameness, which is the culture industry. In this way, God is that which most fundamentally underwrites the culture industry's false promise of the "positive image" of the status quo. The culture industry can idolatrize the status quo because even God, for the culture industry, is part of the status quo. From the perspective of a critical analysis of culture industry, this use and abuse of God to underwrite sameness and the status quo is *the* aesthetic crisis.

The affinity between the culture industry and Zionism's representational aesthetics is thus apparent. We must reject Zionism because we must reject any system that creates a God who wishes to stabilize the status quo. The false God of Zionism wishes for order, for domination—this is a God who lives not in promise and hope but in an ever-pathetic attachment to the oppressive present. Zionism re-presents. The renunciation of Zionism, then, calls for a *displacement*. We are displaced from the present status quo by God's beauty and we hope in the promise that the darkness will not overcome the light—that our efforts to keep beauty alive will not die in vain, but instead are a participation in that which has already been revealed: absolute beauty, Christ. Likewise, our renunciation of the culture industry calls for a displacement. We must displace ourselves from our consumerist selves. Only in this way will we be open enough to work with God, and not consume God. Indeed, to work with God is to be open to constant displacement. Beauty demands the renunciation of attachment—these walls must fall, this state must be overcome, we cannot be attached to the

ideologies of today, because today is not the kingdom. To do beauty is to displace—to displace ourselves and to displace the ugliness of our earth.

On one hand, the concept of displacement is not foreign to aesthetics. Beauty, for better or worse, has always been recognized as that-which-attracts. In this way, traditionally, beauty displaces. Beauty calls us forward. What I am trying to say, though, is that the displacement is itself beautiful. To displace—to reject a place, to renounce a place, our place, the Israeli's place, the Palestinian's place, we can believe in equality of displacement—is to do beauty. The fundamental act of aesthetics is that of renunciation, and this unsettles, displaces. For Adorno, this displacement changes second nature. For the culture industry, this displacement is an unpardonable crime. For theological aesthetics, this displacement is a participation in the building of the kingdom of God.

The idea of displacement is radically negative. We are not displaced from here to there. No, we shake things up, we move along, we renounce and renounce and renounce. It is the total displacement of the category of ugliness that allowed Christ to forgive ugliness itself. A radical and extreme displacement does not rest content with a shifting from one status quo to the next. No, a radical displacement recognizes that beauty is uneasy, dis-easy, dizzy. The moment beauty becomes easy, we can be sure that whatever we have is not the beautiful: this too can be renounced, this too can be beatified. It is only because of Christ's promise that our dizziness is a participatory dizziness, a dizziness in the midst of absolute beauty, a dizziness shared by a community

of beauty-doers, that we can march on. Perhaps a contrast between the typical category of "conversion" and this call for displacement can shed light on the idea.

Typically, the conclusion of a piece like this calls for conversion, or promises that our hope lays in the power of conversion. Richard Viladesau, coming as a Lonerganian of sorts, writes in his tome *Theological Aesthetics* that the proper function of aesthetics, actually art, is to participate in the process of conversion. Viladesau claims that:

> Within the larger field of "the aesthetic" art has a particular role to play in the economy of salvation. In its very performance of creating order out of disorder, art can be both a symbol of the redemptive process and an element in its accomplishment: an aspect of our present sharing in God's glory and an anticipation of its final victory.[75]

Art can be both symbol and element of redemption because:

> The kind of art that serves beauty, as Balthasar says, "brings with it a self-evidence that enlightens without mediation." This self-evidence of beauty is the ultimate connection between art and goodness, and is a fitting point on which to end these considerations.[76]

With this, Adorno would not be pleased. If these reflections have shown anything, it may be that true beauty brings disorder as much as it brings order. In fact, order, as a dominating category of sameness produced by the culture industry, is antithetical to beauty's progressive march. An occupation is very orderly. If here Viladesau is referring to some higher order, some divine hierarchy, then he is in fact calling for a disorderly intrusion into the status quo: beauty does not bring order out of disorder, but is precisely the displacing of the status quo.[77] Furthermore, as we have seen, it is *precisely* beauty's presumed self-evidence that should be most critiqued. In the final analysis, we

---

[75] Viladesau, R. (1999). *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pg. 210

[76] ibid.

[77] Viladesau's language of "creation" is also problematic. Whether or not beauty creates, and what it creates, would require an extensive analysis. Can a verb create, or is it created? Regardless, beauty and creation are rather heavy and loaded categories, and perhaps should not be so haphazardly brought together.

say with John that darkness will not overcome the light, and that the light is the Word made flesh in Christ. But how this appears with us, in second nature dominated by the culture industry, should not be taken so naively, so uncritically. Finally, this talk of conversion betrays one of our initial critical moves: Viladesau uncritically privileges beauty's aesthetic position. Christ is absolute beauty, but in order to be so, he subjected himself to absolute ugliness. It was his ability to renounce renunciation—to see ugliness to its end—that accounts for his absolute beauty. *If* the aesthetic results in or participates in some sort of conversion, then it does so via an engagement with ugliness; that is, via renunciation, which, after all, is *the* fundamental aesthetic act.

But conversion is not the language game proper to critical theological aesthetics. To what should the Palestinians convert? This is offensive. If the Christian interested in theological aesthetics has anything to offer the occupied, it is a program of destabilizing the aesthetic structures of occupation: aesthetics can help show the difference between a home and a checkpoint, between an image of a martyr and the absolute negative image of Christ, and can work to beatify the situation: aesthetics demands that walls come down and the kingdom gets built. Aesthetics can also comfortably say: *Israel, which occupies and wishes to keep it so, is doing ugliness. Palestine, which is occupied and wishes to beatify the situation, wants beauty.* When, with Ateek, we recognize that God's character has been called into question our response is not: "And so convert." This, too, would be felt as oppression. Our response is to do beauty with those who want beauty. Our response is to displace the ugly status quo, to renounce and negate it,

and to stand in solidarity with the victims of ugliness. We do not convert from this to that, but are constantly displaced. The moment we find our place, we lose beauty.

By knowingly engaging this project of beauty, which is a project of failure insofar as we can never rest easy, theological aesthetics makes its own claim as to God's character. God is a God of promise. We recognize that the aesthetic path, as one of renunciation, is one of darkness. But God is a God who has shown and promised that darkness will not overcome the light. And this on the aesthetic, fleshly, relational level. The occupied have had their flesh reduced to mere matter. Our response reflects our understanding of the character of God: Has God absolutely beatified the flesh or not? Is this occupation of the flesh with or against what God has been revealed to be beautiful? Likewise, wrong relationships abound, but we have been promised that relationship with Christ, and Christ's beauty, will never cease. Working from and with this image, we can get to the work of renouncing the wrong relationships—and beatifying them. We claim that Christ is the absolutely beautiful, and so we get to the hard work of beatification.

Which is to say, because theological aesthetics is based on the promise of beauty, our hope takes the form of response. We have a responsibility to beauty, which lives. We must choose whether or not to stay put. If we stay put, we endorse the status quo and make ourselves roadblocks to beauty. But if we respond to the status quo by beatifying it, by doing beauty, by critiquing and questioning and participating with God, then we make ourselves doers of beauty. In our renunciation of occupation, an aesthetic renunciation which requires a forming of relationships and an engagement with

materiality, we make ourselves doers of beauty. This requires a deep engagement with the culture industry, which is what has allowed us to conceive of a God that allows occupation. We must help God break out: break out of the consumerist walls of America, and out of the concrete walls of Palestine. By allowing ourselves to be trapped in these walls of our own making, as Chomsky said in the very beginning, we have allowed the oppressed to be trapped by walls that they hate. Which is to say, complicity with the status quo here is an endorsement of the status quo there: sameness begets sameness, and the culture industry's ban on negative beauty runs afoul. This is the ultimate betrayal of beauty, and this is that from which we must be displaced; these are the walls from which we must break free. To do beauty fully, I think, we must perform a beautiful jailbreak everywhere. If beauty could ever become predicated, it would be here: here, in the choice to respond to the earth, to second nature, to the "situation," to occupation in particular, by doing beauty—here one becomes beautiful.

References

Primary Texts

Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory,* trans. Robert Hullot Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Originally published 1970.

--- "Culture industry reconsidered," from *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, trans. JM Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991). Originally published 1963. Retrieved from: http://www.sociosite.net/topics/texts/adorno_culture_reconsidered.pdf

Adorno, Theodor & Horkheimer, Max. *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* trans. Edmund Iephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002). Originally published 1944.

Ateek, Naim. *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008).

--- "What is morally and theologically wrong with suicide bombings?" Studies in World Christianity. 8.1(2002): 5-30

--- *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989).

Chomsky, Noam & Pappé, Illan. *On Palestine,* ed. Frank Barat (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015).

Supplementary Texts

Chomsky, Noam. "The Nightmare in Gaza." (Alternet, 2014). Retrieved from: http://www.alternet.org/world/noam-chomsky-nightmare-gaza.html

--- "Outrage." (Information Clearing House, 2014). Retrieved from: http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article39311.html

--- "Ceasefires in Which Violations Never Cease." (Tom's Dispatch, 2014). Retrieved from: http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175892/

Fogle, Nikolaus. "Beautiful Places in Adorno's Aesthetics*."* (University of Quebec). Retrievable from: http://www.uqtr.ca/AE/Vol_15/Authenticity/Authenticity_Fogle.htm

Foucault, Michel. *Manet and the Object of Painting,* trans. Matthew Barr (London: Tate Publishing, 2009)

McDonald, David. "Poetics and the Performance of Violence in Israel/Palestine." Ethnomusicology. 53.1 (2009): 59-82

Murray, Eóin. "The Art of War." (The Electronic Intifada, 2005). Retrieved from: https://electronicintifada.net/content/art-war/5418

Thompson, Nato. *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century,* (Brooklyn: Melville House)

"UN spokesman Chris Gunness breaks down during interview on Gaza - video." (The Guardian, 2014). Retrieved from: www.theguardian.com%2Fworld%2Fvideo%2F2014%2Fjul%2F31%2Fun-spokesman-chris-gunness-breaks-down-during-aljazeera-interview-

video&usg=AFQjCNEPR_ePWTUeOuhuf4AhGKglXqdnuw

Viladesau, Richard. *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Statistics

"Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and Unconventional Warfare," Johnston's Archive. Retrieved from: http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/terrorism/

"Suicide and other Bombing Attacks in Israel Since the Declaration of Principles," Israel Ministry of Foerign Affairs. Retrieved from: http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/terrorism/palestinian/pages/suicide%20and%20other%20bombing%20attacks%20in%20israel%20since.aspx

"Terrorism Against Israel: Comprehensive List of Fatalities," Jewish Virtual Library. Retrieved from: http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:y5OC-NQXRjsJ:www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Terrorism/victims.html+%22french+hill%22+junction+terrorist&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=13

Mitchell Bard, "West Bank Security Fence." (Jewish Virtual Library, 2016). Retrieved from: https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Peace/fence.html

"Protection of Civilians," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Retrieved from: http://www.ochaopt.org/poc16february-22february-2016.aspx